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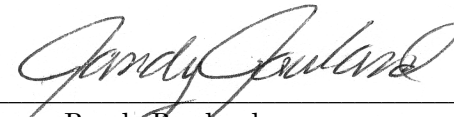
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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:



Randy Rowland



Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: September 2, 2014

USING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN HIGH
SCHOOL STUDENTS AT THE CONEJO VALLEY CHURCH

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JACK WILLIAMSON
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ABSTRACT

Using Biblical Narrative for Spiritual Formation in High School Students at the Conejo Valley Church

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Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2014

The purpose of this project is to aid spiritual and identity development in high school students using small groups and spiritual disciplines at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. Through small groups and spiritual disciplines, students will learn to develop spiritual habits and gain insight into how biblical characters can act as spiritual mentors in their lives. The congregation is located in Thousand Oaks, California, which offers top-rated schools and multiple extracurricular activities. These factors combine to give teens in the area tremendous opportunities for personal development. They also can lead to an over-programmed lifestyle where students feel overwhelmed with activity and ambition. For many, church involvement and intentional spiritual formation fall to a lower priority than other aspects of personal development.

This project is presented in three parts. Part One describes the ministry context of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. It outlines the challenges presented by the opportunities available to adolescents and the over-programming many experience. Part Two highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the Churches of Christ heritage as it relates to this project. While the Churches of Christ heritage is useful in holding up Scripture as a solid pattern for the spiritual life, attention also will be given to the works of N. T. Wright and Dallas Willard as they inform the importance of the present Kingdom of God in calling adolescents to see themselves as participants in the grand story of God.

Part Three outlines the ministry strategy. Parents of teenagers will be trained as mentors and small group leaders. Teens who participate in small groups will develop spiritual habits of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer with an eye toward understanding their identity and purpose as designed by God while seeing how specific biblical characters can serve as spiritual mentors in their lives.

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INTRODUCTION

Raising teenagers today to become confident, capable adults can be a daunting task. Helping them become faithful Christian adults who carry on the values, practices, and traditions of a deep, abiding relationship with God is even more difficult. This, however, is the goal and necessary task for those who minister to families in the Church today. The health of the Christian faith in America and of the American Church rests in the practices adult believers successfully pass on or fail to pass on to the next generation. This is even more pressing, since youth today seem to be a generation slipping away from faith.

Recent research has shown that unless the American Church can achieve greater effectiveness with this next generation, it may be in trouble. As Kenda Creasy Dean puts it: “American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it doesn’t concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.”¹ Sociologist Robert Wuthnow states that the American Church is losing its influence on today’s generation of twenty and thirty year olds, because it is failing to connect with them in the midst of social and political changes. He notes that, among other factors, as young adults postpone marriage and having children the traditional connections earlier generations found with the local church are slipping away. Consequently, so are the baby boomers and perhaps this current generation of teenagers.²

¹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

² Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 54-66.

Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, the authors of *Soul Searching*, also sound a somber alarm regarding the state of religious belief among American adolescents. The most significant implication of their findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion is that the traditional Christian faith in the United States slowly and subtly is being supplanted by a quite different faith, which they label “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”³

They describe the “de facto creed” of this new religion in five key points. First, God exists as the creator who orders the world and watches over life on earth. He is not particularly involved in the daily lives of individuals, unless He is needed to help solve a problem. God simply wants all people to be good, nice, and fair to one another—in line with the teaching of most world religions. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. In the end, good people go to heaven when they die.⁴ If this is in fact the state of religious belief of American teens, the Church in the United States is definitely in trouble.

On a positive note, recent research indicates parents still have a large amount of influence in the lives of their teens.⁵ There is great reason for hope if parents who take their faith seriously also take seriously their responsibility to make wise choices with their time and priorities in order to pass on their faith to the next generation. This passing

³ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-166.

⁴ Ibid., 162-163.

⁵ See the further findings and recommendation from the “National Study of Youth and Religion,” in Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 56, 115, 120; Dean, *Almost Christian*, 109-130; Kara E. Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith, Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 116-119. These works will be referenced more fully throughout this doctoral project.

on of faith, however, happens by example and action—not by words and intellectual assent alone. The pressures and busyness of twenty-first-century life can pit strong priorities of achievement and success directly against the priorities of Christian spiritual formation. Juggling these priorities, while not allowing the time constraints caused by so many activities to steal away time and attention from spiritual formation, is a struggle for parents and teens in American society today. High school students and their parents in the Conejo Valley Church of Christ face this exact struggle over priorities.

Conejo Valley Church of Christ is located in Thousand Oaks, California. Faculty and staff from Pepperdine University make up a significant percentage of Conejo's membership. This, combined with the affluence and high educational level of the general population, make the community context a place where adolescents are quite driven and face high expectations for achievement. Thousand Oaks also offers multiple extracurricular activities, from club and high school sports to top-ranked music and dance programs. While these give teens tremendous opportunities for personal development, they also can lead to a very busy lifestyle where students feel overwhelmed with activity and the need to achieve. Many are over-programmed to the point that church involvement and intentional spiritual formation fall to a lower priority than other aspects of personal development.

Recognizing identity development as a major function of adolescence, and the importance of the parent-child relationship, this project seeks to help high school students find their identity in their relationship with God. As parents and other adult leaders guide teens through the spiritual disciplines of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer, students will learn to view biblical characters as spiritual mentors in their lives. They will

see that their life stories are part of the great story of God and that their value and identity rest in living His purposes with their talents and abilities.

The heart of this project will be a six-week small group experience designed for high school students with parents and other adults serving as mentors and group leaders. Parents and other adults will be trained in advance to see how God has worked through their life stories as well as those of biblical characters. In return, they will lead high school students to examine their own life story and recognize their God-given gifts and abilities.

Through small group discussions, Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer, students will examine the life stories of people in the Bible. Adult leaders will guide them to seek the stories of one or two biblical characters with whom they can relate most closely. By viewing these biblical people as mentors in their lives, students will be guided to see that God wishes to work in their lives in many of the same ways He worked in and through the lives of biblical characters.

The end goal is for the parents, other adult leaders, and high school students to see that their gifts, abilities, and life stories are more similar to those of biblical characters than they previously might have realized. In a very real sense, each person's life story is a part of the grand narrative of God. True purpose and identity rest in living the part God has designed for each person to play in the grand story of His present and future Kingdom.

This topic is discussed in three parts. Part One describes the community context of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. It outlines challenges presented by the many opportunities available to adolescents and the resulting over-programming many

experience. These issues often lead to a lack of time and commitment dedicated to spiritual formation.

In particular, this section will highlight several aspects of life in the Conejo Valley. The community context offers a unique set of challenges to parents who desire to give their children the best of all the opportunities available. The success-driven culture and affluence of the area, along with multiple opportunities available from community resources and schools, can combine to place a great deal of strain on family schedules. Parents who desire to give their children all the opportunities the community affords can find it difficult to make time in their schedules to help their children develop a genuine Christian faith and practice continued spiritual formation.

Part Two will examine Conejo's connection to the American Restoration Movement. Originally based in the nineteenth-century search for unity by restoring primitive Christianity, the Churches of Christ heritage holds a high view of the importance of Scripture. This is the strongest point in Conejo's heritage, which informs and supports this doctoral project.

In the broader Churches of Christ landscape, the Conejo Valley congregation has its own unique qualities. Its history and connection to Pepperdine University give Conejo a more progressive theological perspective than many congregations belonging to the Churches of Christ on the West Coast. As a result, the Conejo church is a place where new ideas are welcome. This openness creates a strong, positive environment for experimentation in spiritual disciplines and new ministry initiatives, such as the one this project proposes.

Part Three will present the ministry strategy and implementation. Parents of teenagers and other adults will play an integral part. They will learn to outline their own life stories and reflect on them. Through Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer, they also will reflect on the lives of biblical characters with whom they most closely relate. Subsequently, they will serve as small group leaders and mentors to high school students, helping them repeat the process.

Teens who participate in small groups will learn and develop the spiritual habits of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer. They will write out their own life story through a personal timeline. They will reflect prayerfully on their life experiences and discern their God-given gifts and abilities. Adult leaders also will lead them to read and meditate on the life stories of biblical characters, learning to see them as spiritual mentors for their lives. The goal is for them to see how, similar to the life stories of biblical characters, their life story also fits into the grand story of God. Participants will answer a survey about their perceptions of their life story and how God works in it, before and after the experience, to assess how their views and perceptions have changed through the process.

PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

COMMUNITY CONTEXT OF THE CONEJO VALLEY

The Conejo Valley Church of Christ is set in an affluent bedroom community in the heart of the Conejo Valley, approximately forty miles north of Los Angeles. The majority of people living in the Conejo Valley are affluent and successful. Thousand Oaks is a highly educated, family-oriented community offering many programs and opportunities for families. These factors combine to make it a very pleasant place to raise children. At the same time, the high level of expected achievement and activity placed on high school students can put a strain on them and their family, creating a very busy and over-programmed lifestyle.

General Affluence of the Conejo Valley

Several factors contribute to the busy, achievement-driven lifestyle of the teens and families targeted for this project. First, the general affluence of the community creates a high level of expectation in the minds and hearts of teens of accumulating material wealth. Added to this pressure is the subsequent expectation for high achievement and educational success for teenagers. Students in high schools in the Conejo Valley are driven to excel through Advanced Placement and International

Baccalaureate programs in every high school. There are also a number of extracurricular activities available. The Thousand Oaks community offers a plethora of opportunities for teens to be involved in sports and arts programs at very demanding and time-consuming levels. For families with teens, the desire to give children every opportunity and prepare them to be well rounded and successful can lead to families who are overcommitted and overscheduled. Affluence and multiple opportunities can combine to consume every bit of time and energy a family has to offer.

High Income and Home Values

According to the most recent data from the United States Census Bureau, the median income for households in the state of California is \$61,631. The reported median household income for the city of Thousand Oaks is almost 63 percent higher at \$100,373. This is almost double the amount of \$52,000 reported as the national average for the United States.¹

This higher income level also is reflected in home values in the Conejo Valley. While the national median for an owner-occupied, single-family home is around \$106,000, and the California median value is \$421,000, the median value for an owner-occupied, single-family dwelling in Thousand Oaks is \$644,000. That is six times the national mean and 65 percent higher than the mean in California.² With such affluence being the norm for teens, they grow up under the impression that they also will have high

¹ United States Census Bureau, "California, State and County Quick Facts," <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html> (accessed September 20, 2013).

² Ibid.

incomes and affluent lifestyles as adults. This places a great amount of pressure on them to excel academically in order to become financially successful adults.

High Level of Education

The population of the Conejo Valley/Thousand Oaks area is highly educated. The United States Census Bureau reports that 28.2 percent of Americans, aged twenty-five years and older, have bachelor's degrees or beyond. For the state of California, this percentage is slightly higher at 30.2 percent. The Thousand Oaks area is significantly higher still, with 48.8 percent of adults aged twenty-five and older holding at least a bachelor's degree.³

It makes sense that with such a highly educated adult population there would be a high priority placed on education for children and teens. In the Conejo Valley, there are five traditional public high schools, three private high schools, and at least two rigorously academic home-school programs at the high school level. There is also a public continuation high school for students who struggle socially or academically in the traditional high school environment. Additionally, there is an alternative public high school, offering online curriculum for students who have the need for a non-traditional approach to education.

To clearly outline all of the academic and extracurricular elements of each of these high school programs is beyond the scope of this project. For this reason, one aspect will be used as a representative measure of the academic rigor of high schools in the area. A solid representative statistic is the number of students taking Advanced

³ Ibid.

Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses in five traditional public high schools and the largest private high school in the Conejo Valley.

According to a review of California high schools presented by *U.S. News and World Report*, between 34 percent and 60 percent of high school students in the Conejo Valley participated in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs during the 2010-2011 school year. At Thousand Oaks High School, 43 percent of students participated in AP classes. The average number of AP exams taken over a high school career by each student was 4.2.⁴ In the same academic year, 54 percent of students at Oak Park High School participated in AP classes. The average number of AP exams taken per student was 4 tests over their high school career.⁵ For Westlake High School in the same time period, 62 percent of students took AP classes with an average of 4.8 tests taken per student over their high school career.⁶ At Newbury Park High School, 39 percent of students participated in AP classes. The average number of AP exams taken by each student over their high school career was 3.8.⁷ At Agoura High School 34 percent of

⁴ Education: Best High Schools, “Thousand Oaks High School Test Scores,” *U.S. News and World Report*, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/conejo-valley-unified-school-district/thousand-oaks-high-school-2002/test-scores> (accessed September 22, 2013).

⁵ Education: Best High Schools, “Oak Park High School Test Scores,” *U.S. News and World Report*, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/oak-park-unified-school-district/oak-park-high-school-2907/test-scores> (accessed September 22, 2013).

⁶ Education: Best High Schools, “Westlake High School Test Scores,” *U.S. News and World Report*, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/conejo-valley-unified-school-district/westlake-high-school-2003/test-scores> (accessed September 22, 2013).

⁷ Education: Best High Schools, “Newbury Park High School Test Scores,” *U.S. News and World Report*, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/conejo-valley-unified-school-district/newbury-park-high-school-2001/test-scores> (accessed September 22, 2013).

students participated in AP classes. The average number of AP exams taken by each student was 3.5 over their high school career.⁸

While Agoura and Newbury Park high schools have slightly lower percentages of students in the AP program than the other Conejo Valley schools, these schools also offer International Baccalaureate programs in addition to their Advanced Placement program. IB programs are not available at the other Conejo Valley high schools. At Newbury Park High School, 19 percent of the student body was involved in IB classes. The participation level of students enrolled in IB classes at Agoura High School was 11 percent.

At Oaks Christian High School, the largest private high school in the Conejo Valley, 40 percent of students participated in AP classes during the 2012-2013 academic year. However, in 2013, 443 of 991 students enrolled at Oaks Christian took AP exams. That is 45 percent of the student body, 5 percent higher than the number of students enrolled in AP classes.⁹ The average number of AP exams taken per student in a high school career was not available.

It is clear that a significant number of students in the Conejo Valley are involved in advanced course work at their high schools. While these programs are widely understood to be a strong indicator of college readiness, they are also quite demanding. They require a great deal of time and energy in the lives of students.

⁸ Education: Best High Schools, “Agoura High School Test Scores,” *U.S. News and World Report*, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/las-virgenes-unified-school-district/agoura-high-school-2434/test-scores> (accessed September 22, 2013).

⁹ Oaks Christian School, “School Profile Academic Year 2012-2103,” http://www.oakschristian.org/data/files/gallery/FlashWebPartFilesGallery/46453_OCHS_Profile_2014_FINAL.pdf (accessed September, 20, 2013).

An Abundance of Extracurricular Possibilities

In addition to the rigor of high school academics, families in the Thousand Oaks area have a wide array of possible activities for their children to be involved in through sports and the arts. The Conejo Recreation and Park District (CRPD) offers classes and activities for children as young as three years old, with programs for every age level continuing through adulthood. The CRPD website offers information for fifty different sports organizations as well as a full array of dance, music, and acting groups that highlight training and participation from beginning to expert levels.¹⁰ The stated goal for these programs, according to the CRPD website, is to enrich the lives of families in the Conejo Valley.¹¹ However, these same activities can become a hindrance to family cohesiveness and spiritual formation, if they begin to take over the family schedule.

The sports and arts programs at high schools in the Conejo Valley are also highly respected and therefore demanding. These programs require a great amount of time from students who participate. A quick perusal of the activities calendar from any of the Conejo Valley high schools clearly shows that there are high-level, demanding sports and arts programs rehearsing, practicing, performing, or competing almost every night of the week during the school year.

While such programs are largely positive in the lives of families, it has been shown that an abundance of programs can lead to families, especially children and teens,

¹⁰ Conejo Recreation and Parks District, "Conejo Valley Sports Organizations," City of Thousand Oaks, California, http://www.crpdp.org/sports/conejo_valley_sports_organizations.asp (accessed September 20, 2013).

¹¹ Conejo Recreation and Park District, "Mission Statement," <http://www.crpdp.org/directors/mission.asp> (accessed September 21, 2013).

becoming overscheduled. In an address to the International Youth Sports Conference in 2003 Alvin Rosenfeld recognizes this reality, stating: “In just the past 20 years structured sports time has doubled, unstructured children’s activities have gone down 50%, household conversations have become far less frequent, family dinners have declined 33%, and family vacations have decreased 28%.”¹² All of this is due to what he calls “hyper-parenting” which results in children being overloaded with commitments. This leaves families with little or no room for leisure or other positive personal pursuits, such as family time or intentional spiritual formation.

The physical climate and environment of the Conejo Valley are perfectly suited for just such over-programming. With the average annual temperature in Thousand Oaks being around 75 degrees with relatively little annual rainfall, outdoor activities are available year round.¹³ This means that for most sports involving teens, there really is almost no off-season. Many club sports run year round as a training ground for students who play sports at the high school level. One teen I spoke with recently described her time given to tennis this way: “During the season, I practice two hours a day and then have games one or two days a week. About three Saturdays a month, I have tournaments and once in a while there are tournaments on Sunday. The off-season is easier because there are no games or tournaments. Then we only have practice for two hours a day.”¹⁴ While this may be more intense than most student sports, it is not altogether atypical for a

¹² Alvin Rosenfeld, “Harvard, Soccer, and Over-scheduled Families,” <http://www.hyper-parenting.com/talkgreenwich.htm> (accessed October 11, 2013).

¹³ City of Thousand Oaks, “Quick Facts,” <http://www.ci.thousand-oaks.ca.us/civica/filebank/blobload.asp?BlobID=22773> (accessed September 20, 2013).

¹⁴ La Reina High School student, interview by author, Thousand Oaks, CA, October 3, 2013.

teenager in the Conejo Valley who competes in sports and hopes for a college scholarship.¹⁵

Combining Factors and Their Influence: The Search for Success

In order to make sense of how the affluence and opportunities of the Conejo Valley area combine to hinder spiritual formation, it is important to consider what drives families to be so involved. The answer likely lies in people's desire to be successful and how they are driven by an achievement-centered definition of success. Most parents in the Conejo Valley, like most parents everywhere, want to give their children the best possible chance at a good and successful life. They want to offer their children every opportunity to learn and develop as well-rounded people who can make significant contributions to society. In short, they want them to grow to be successful adults. Success, as those in the Conejo Valley define it, is largely in agreement with American ideals. The problem is that the American definition of success does not necessarily leave room for a high priority on spiritual formation.

In a telling article, Susan Schulten details how the American concept of success began as a Puritan idea concerned with glorifying God. Over the last two hundred years, seismic shifts have changed the focus of the American Dream.¹⁶ She notes that as the Puritans came to the New World in search of social and religious freedom, they placed a high value on the community as a means to glorify God. To be a valuable, successful

¹⁵ This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, which focuses on teens and families involved in youth ministry at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ.

¹⁶ Susan Schulten, "Success," in the *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, vol. 3, eds. Mary Kupiec Clayton and Peter W. Williams (New York: Scribner, 2001), 3-10.

person one needed to live for the glory of God and the good of the community. People were to follow their “calling” to work hard and use their wealth for the good of others.

Summarizing the teaching of Puritan Leader, Cotton Mather, Schulten writes:

Mather insisted that, “All that we have is but a Loan from the Great God” and that any material gains were to be used in pious ways, such as paying taxes, lending for the development of other trades, relieving the indigent, and forgiving debts. . . . As Mather wrote, each man is given two oars, the calling to serve God and the calling to find a useful occupation, and both are needed to row toward heaven.¹⁷

For the Puritans, the key to success was a life of industry and productivity, but the basis of that success was to honor Christ. To be a valuable member of society was to live one’s calling and occupation in ways that brought honor to one’s family, community, and God. Personal success depended on living a faithful, virtuous life.

Moving into the eighteenth century, these Puritan ideas were the dominant stream in the United States. However, as time moved on, the concept of industry and personal gain began to be separated from the idea of the community as a means to glorify God. Schulten notes Benjamin Franklin as a prime example of how the Enlightenment influenced this process.¹⁸ Franklin honored the Puritan ideas of frugality, industry, and self-discipline but viewed them in a more secular framework. Driven by the higher view of humankind born in the Enlightenment, Franklin saw these virtues as valuable in themselves without regard for their relation to faith or honoring God. He and many others placed these virtues at the center of their life philosophy but saw them in a secular light, apart from the Christian moorings that grounded them in Puritanism.

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 4.

On the heels of this new view of success, the Protestant work ethic and the idea of the self-made man began to dominate the American ideal of success. Americans were motivated by the belief that anyone could rise among the ranks socially and economically with enough drive and hard work. Even today, this is a major part of the American Dream.

Moving into the Industrial Revolution, a great shift occurred in the view of what it meant to be successful and how success was attained. Industrialization made production much less labor-intensive. For many, this meant that the work ethic in itself no longer would lead to the success it once did. Due to the power and effectiveness of industrialization, a major shift took place. Schulten writes:

With factories producing ever larger quantities of consumer products, the asceticism of the Protestant ethic—work and save, delay self-gratification—necessarily gave way to a new idea that made for its opposites, leisure, play and consumption. . . . Where the nineteenth century has been described as a culture of character, where character development was the goal, by the early twentieth century the self was framed less in terms of self-sacrifice than self-realization.¹⁹

The new ethic urged one to become a consumer rather than a producer. The idea of success was not focused on being a valuable member of society in the sense of adding to the community or improving the state of all people. Rather, the dominant picture of success became that of the person who had more money, possessions, and time to enjoy leisure. As with any generalized ideal, this is not altogether true for every person. Still, this idea dominates much of the landscape of American society to this day.

Schulten's insight rings true for families in the Conejo Valley. Parents suffer long commutes and work many hours to support the lifestyle they desire to give their family.

¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

They sign up their children for multiple events or sports in order to give them the best opportunities. It all leads to highly involved, competent people who have developed high skill sets in several areas. Families hope to gain enough income to give their children “everything.” They have their children involved in multiple programs, so they can be happy and well-rounded individuals. The negative by-product is a lifestyle marked by busyness and being over-programmed.

Many families go out of their way to help their children be involved in club sports, dance, or music. Their schedules become packed until evenings, and weekends are filled with one drive after another getting to all the games, practices, and events. All this is done with the goal in mind of giving children the best opportunities possible. While these things are largely good, they can squeeze out time for families just to be together at home or to take time for extra connection with church family or activities designed for spiritual formation.

This cycle sets up a tremendous tension in the lives of many Christian families. Believing parents want to make time for church and youth group events, but they also want to give their children every opportunity to learn and grow through the same events that keep all families busy. They can fall into the trap of talking about the importance of “church,” but when coaches or group directors threaten to lower grades or cut back playing time for absence due to church activities, the event takes precedent over “church.”

This is a dilemma for parents. They want to teach their children loyalty and the importance of sticking to commitments but find commitments to church or extracurricular activities are often in conflict. When youth group activities or church

attendance consistently lose that battle, children receive a clear message about their parents' priorities. Parents may believe that youth group involvement is vital to their teen's development; but if their example shows that sports and other events always take precedence over church or youth group, that example speaks louder than spiritual words. This is important for parents to recognize, because the example of parents is very influential in the development of teens.

The Importance of Parents

One common thread running through much of the research on adolescent spiritual formation in recent years is that parents hold the greatest amount of influence on the spiritual and emotional development of their teens. In *Soul Searching* Smith and Denton write: "Parents are normally very important in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of their children, even though they may not realize it."²⁰ Dean sums up this finding from the National Study of Youth and Religion in one succinct phrase: "Parents matter most when it comes to the religious formation of their children."²¹ Kara E. Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford agree. They state: "It's difficult to find a Sticky Faith factor that is more significant than students' parents."²² What parents think and say—or more importantly, how they act through example—has a tremendous influence on how their children view the importance of faith.

²⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 56.

²¹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 18.

²² Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith, Youth Worker Edition*, 117.

Faith development is not the only factor for which parents have a strong influence on their teenagers. Spiritual development is part of a broader picture of identity development. The priorities parents and other adults set regarding school, extracurricular activities, and church or youth group involvement speak volumes about what they see as important. In return, these choices help shape the views, values, and priorities that teenagers routinely adopt. Regarding this influence on personal development, Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise write:

Whether we intend it that way or not, the things we do and say, as well as those we choose not to do or say, make clear to our children what we value and what we do not . . . they watch what we do and come to their own conclusions accepting or rejecting them based on how well, from the child's perspective, that way of life seems to be working. Based on their conclusions, they will choose a self that is most clearly a reflection of what we have valued or a reaction against it.²³

A great deal of research has confirmed that parents are powerful agents for their children's identity development overall. Monisha Pasupathi and Timothy Hoyt reveal that the parent-child relationship is one of the key factors contributing to the context in which identity development takes place for children and adolescents.²⁴ Elli P. Schachter and Jonathan Ventura contend that "parents are active and purposeful co-participants in their children's identity formation and later identity development."²⁵ As children grow up in affluence, they naturally believe that this is the way life is supposed to be. In their minds,

²³ Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise, *The Over-scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 220.

²⁴ Monisha Pasupathi and Timothy Hoyt, "The Development of Narrative Identity in Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood: The Continued Importance of Listeners," *Developmental Psychology* 45, no. 2 (March 2009): 558.

²⁵ Elli P. Schachter and Jonathan J. Ventura, "Identity Agents, Parents as Reflective Participants in their Children's Identity Formation," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 18, no. 3 (September 2008): 453.

when they become adults they will have a lifestyle very similar to their parents and carry the same values that their parents have taught them both by word and example.

Elizabeth W. Ozorak describes parents' views on life and meaning as "cognitive anchors" for their children.²⁶ As parents share their views about life and the way the world works, these views become the ideas and concepts that children connect to in their minds in order to make sense of the world around them. Ozorak points out that these views can be shared either through direct conversation with children or through other ways that the child may simply observe.²⁷ Adolescents who grow up in an affluent family and live a busy, over-programmed lifestyle likely will find their identity and personal value tied to how much they accomplish and what they can achieve. If little true time and attention are given to spiritual formation in the midst of this busy lifestyle, it is likely that children and teens will not see spiritual formation as very important. At best, they may see spiritual development or involvement with a church family as an add-on activity to their already busy lives.

The Narrative of Affluence

The aforementioned research suggests that adolescent identity formation is largely shaped by the context and environment of the family. This family context, in turn, is influenced greatly by the attitudes and actions of parents. The larger narratives by which parents see the world shape their own identity and thus the identity of their children.

²⁶ Elizabeth W. Ozorak, "Social and Cognitive Influences on the Development of Religious Belief and Commitment in Adolescence," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 4 (December 1989): 452.

²⁷ Ibid.

Stated differently, the worldview or narrative which forms parents' understanding of their role and place in life has a significant influence on their children's perspectives and subsequent spiritual development and identity formation. Such narratives help define much of the context in which families function.

According to Schachter and Ventura, the contextual nature of personal development is widely acknowledged in the field of developmental psychology.²⁸ As an example, they rely upon the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, as a leader in the field, claiming that personal identity development cannot be understood unless its study takes into account the larger context of each individual.²⁹ Family narratives, and the belief systems which support them, form the foundation of how children see the world and their role in it.³⁰ For this reason, it is difficult to understand or even study identity apart from family context.

The community context of the Conejo Valley is largely affluent. With busy lifestyles and a view of success driven by achievement, spiritual development can be squeezed out by other priorities. Families easily find themselves caught in the trap of making spiritual development an add-on activity, which may or may not fit into their schedules. This project seeks to offer a solution for the problem facing such families.

²⁸ Schachter and Ventura, "Identity Agents," 450.

²⁹ Ibid. In particular, they rely upon Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

³⁰ Carl N. Johnson and Chris J. Boyatzis, "Cognitive-Cultural Foundations of Spiritual Development," in *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, eds. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 215.

CHAPTER 2

MINISTRY CONTEXT OF THE CONEJO VALLEY CHURCH OF CHRIST

Set in the tradition of the American Restoration Movement in general, and Churches of Christ in particular, the Conejo Valley church places a high value on Scripture and its application to daily life. Conejo families are typically high-achieving and over-programmed, with a significant number of them connected to Pepperdine University. These factors create an atmosphere where teens are confronted with multiple opportunities which compete with their ability to be consistently involved with ministry activities.

Heritage: The American Restoration Movement

The Conejo Valley Church of Christ stands in the heritage of the American Restoration Movement. This nineteenth-century Christian movement also is known as the Stone-Campbell Movement, named after its two most prominent founders, Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone.¹ The movement began with a goal of Christian unity. These American reformers believed unity among Christians could be achieved if all

¹ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of the Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 2.

followers of Jesus would drop denominational ties, titles, and divisions to come together to be “Christians only.”² The central call and theme of the movement was to stand together professing faith in Jesus, taking the Bible as the only rule and final authority for all matters of faith and church governance.³

In the introduction to his book, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, Richard T. Hughes outlines several characteristics which have shaped this tradition.⁴ The most dominant, enduring theme is the notion of restoring primitive Christianity. This is the idea that Christian unity could be achieved and the Kingdom of God could be realized if manmade creeds, denominational structures, and titles were dropped in favor of the simple pattern for the Church described in the pages of the New Testament and practiced by first-century believers. Their cry was “no creed but the Bible.” Their call was simple, even naive. Encouraged by the common sense and logic of the Enlightenment, Campbell believed that the Book of Acts and the New Testament epistles offered a blueprint for the Body of Christ as God intended it to be. According to Hughes, Campbell and those who followed him argued that if people would follow the Bible alone, Christian unity would result and the world would come to Christ.

Sadly, this dream never was realized. In the end, standing together on the Bible alone was not as easy or effective as they had hoped. In time, differences in how to interpret key passages or how to discern which passages were the most important caused rifts among believers. The ensuing debate over how to live biblical principles eventually

² Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1981), 73.

³ Ibid., 269-270.

⁴ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 1-8.

led to divisions in this unity movement, giving birth to at least eight factions within the Churches of Christ today as well as the more significant splits between the Churches of Christ, the Independent Christian churches, and the Disciples of Christ denominations as they exist today.⁵

The Churches of Christ no longer hope in the simplicity of unity based on a common-sense interpretation of Scripture. However, what the Churches of Christ carry forth from the tradition is a continued belief in the importance of the Bible as a guide for individuals and the Church. Stemming from this heritage is an enduring dependence on Scripture. This principle is the most significant factor in the theology and ecclesiology of the Churches for Christ today and for the Conejo Valley Church of Christ.

The Conejo Valley Church of Christ

In line with the heritage of the American Restoration Movement, the Conejo Valley Church of Christ encourages the unity of believers and the restoration of church practices to the earliest possible biblical examples. These include believer's baptism, locally appointed elders, encouraging all members to take part in ministry, and the observance of weekly communion. As with its sister "churches of Christ,"⁶ the Conejo

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ This is typically how we define ourselves: the "churches of Christ." Since we have no centralized denominational headquarters or official denominational structure, this designation is intentional. Each local congregation is independent and appoints its own local leadership, from within the congregation. Congregations do cooperate with one another and encourage the support of mission efforts and universities worldwide, but we are a loosely connected denomination with no formal overarching leadership. Most congregations still claim that they are non-denominational, even though we function as a denomination without centralized leadership.

Valley church stands as an independent congregation responsible for its own leadership, worship, and work.⁷

Beginnings of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ

The Conejo Valley Church of Christ began as a church plant in March 1973. It was established in response to the growth of the Thousand Oaks area and the influx of members of the Churches of Christ who had moved to the Conejo Valley due to the opening of the Malibu campus of Pepperdine University in 1972. In the early years, the church met in various public facilities before buying land and constructing a building on Hillcrest Drive, in Thousand Oaks, where the congregation gathers today.⁸

Initially, all elements of the worship and work of the church were performed completely by the volunteer efforts of lay members. These works included preaching, teaching, and music ministries. According to Douglas A. Foster, this is common practice for a burgeoning Churches of Christ congregation, as lay leadership is a natural expression of the restoration principle of the “priesthood of all believers.”⁹ It is significant to the Conejo Valley church ministry context to note that many of these early lay leaders were faculty or staff at Pepperdine.

In 1974, the congregation hired its first part-time preacher and augmented that in 1985 with a full-time “personal minister/evangelist,” whose primary duties were to

⁷ Conejo Valley Church of Christ, “Conejo’s Church History,” <http://www.conejochurch.org/2007/content/index.php?id=45> (accessed May 19, 2014). There actually is no denominational website for the Churches of Christ, so I have cited a short description from the Conejo church website from the subsection entitled “Denominational Structure.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Douglas A. Foster, *The Story of the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2011), 28.

respond to personal needs of members and the community. In 1989, the church added a part-time youth minister and eventually expanded the part-time preaching position into a full-time role. The youth ministry role became a full-time position in 1993. In 2001, a part-time children's minister joined the ministry team. An additional part-time youth minister position was added in 2012. Currently the church has a full-time preaching minister, a full-time youth/family minister, a part-time youth minister, two part-time secretaries, and a part-time children's minister.¹⁰

Congregational Characteristics

While it stands squarely in the Churches of Christ tradition, Conejo has some distinct characteristics that make it unique. Many of the members and much of the leadership of Conejo work and teach at Pepperdine University. A high percentage of Conejo members are families with young children. These factors combine to give Conejo a strong academic bent and enhanced ministry emphasis on children and families. Community service is another characteristic of the Conejo church, which is driven by a desire to be a blessing to those in the surrounding community who are in need.

Of the 150 family units in the Conejo church directory,¹¹ 50 percent have a direct tie to Pepperdine University. Of these seventy-five families, fifty-five have a family member who serves as faculty, staff, or administration at the university. The remaining twenty families with a tie to the university are at Conejo largely because a family member is either a current or a former student at Pepperdine. From its inception,

¹⁰ Conejo Valley Church of Christ, "Conejo's Church History," under "Staffing."

¹¹ Conejo Valley Church of Christ, "Printable Membership Directory," <http://www.conejochurch.org/2007/members/directory.php> (accessed October 1, 2013).

members of the Pepperdine faculty and staff have played a large role in leadership and worship at the Conejo church. That strong connection to Pepperdine is still present today.

The Conejo Valley Church of Christ is a medium-sized congregation with a strong emphasis on ministry to children, youth, and families.¹² Currently, Conejo has around three hundred members and enjoys a vibrant children's ministry and youth ministry.¹³ Every week there are approximately eighty children in Sunday school classes, ranging from infants to fifth grade. Additionally, there are twenty-six middle school students and forty-eight high school students in the youth group. A significant portion of the budget and ministerial focus goes to building up the children and promoting the educational programs for all ages.

In line with the high percentage of members affiliated with Pepperdine, Conejo places a high priority on educational programs. A structured curriculum plan guides Sunday school Bible classes for all ages. Throughout the week, the church offers a wide variety of Bible studies and experiences designed to enhance the biblical knowledge of Conejo members, children, and guests who attend worship services, Bible classes, and small groups.¹⁴

Community service is another priority of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. Since 2003, the congregation has been serving a local public elementary school whose student body includes the lowest income families in the community. Conejo members

¹² Conejo Valley Church of Christ, "Youth Ministries," <http://www.conejochurch.org/2007/content/index.php?id=47> (accessed May 6, 2014).

¹³ Tina Scruggs, *Conejo Valley Church of Christ Family News, 2010 to 2014* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Conejo Valley Church of Christ, 2014). Scruggs is the office manager at Conejo Valley Church of Christ.

¹⁴ Conejo Valley Church of Christ, "Adult Education," <http://www.conejochurch.org/2007/content/index.php?id=49> (accessed May 6, 2014).

offer weekly tutoring to first graders whose families speak English as their second language. The church also conducts several annual service projects to beautify the elementary school campus or to show appreciation and support to the teachers and staff at the school. In connection with this, the Conejo Valley Church of Christ provides food to low-income families through gift baskets and ongoing benevolence.

Obstacles to Church Involvement and Spiritual Growth of Students

While the Conejo Valley Church of Christ does offer many activities and opportunities for service and spiritual growth, it can be difficult for families to be involved consistently. As noted in Chapter 1, families with teens in the Conejo Valley are often over-scheduled with many good activities that can compete with church involvement. As a test of this theory, families with teenagers in the Conejo Valley Church of Christ were asked to fill out a simple survey about how much time their teens spend in school, with homework, and in extracurricular activities on a weekly basis. Parents from thirty-five families of the total forty-two surveyed responded in 2013.

The same surveys were given to students, so they could respond from their perspective. The two sets of surveys were compared to check for consistency between their reporting of time involved in school and extracurricular activities. There was no significant difference between the information reported by parents and students. To simplify the reporting for this project, the results of the parents' survey are given below.

Time Spent in School

The first two questions on the survey dealt with the amount of time high school students spend in school each week. Question #1 asked what time students have to leave

home for school in the morning. Question #2 asked what time students get out of school before coming home or going to an extracurricular activity. As shown in figures 1 and 2 below, 84 percent of Conejo students leave home before 7:30 a.m. to go to school. A full 93 percent are not out of school until 2:15 p.m. or later. The 7 percent who do leave school by 1:30 p.m. are seniors who go directly to a job or other commitment.

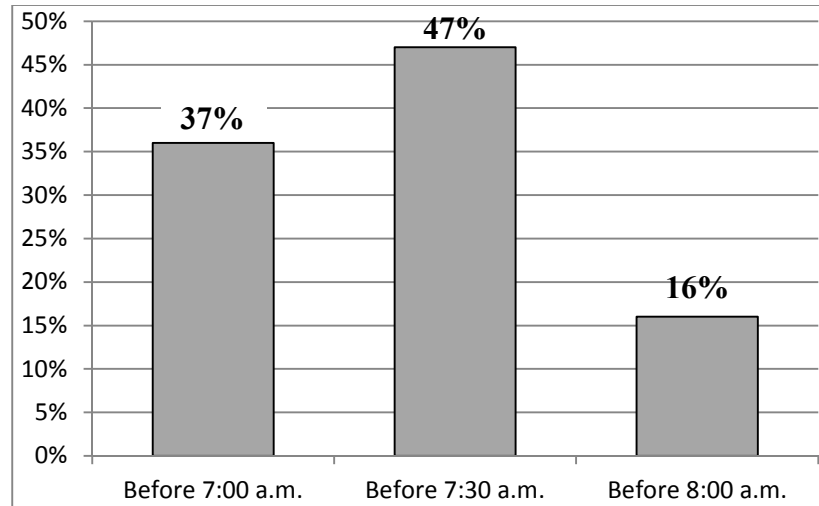


Figure 1. Time Students Leave Home for School in the Morning

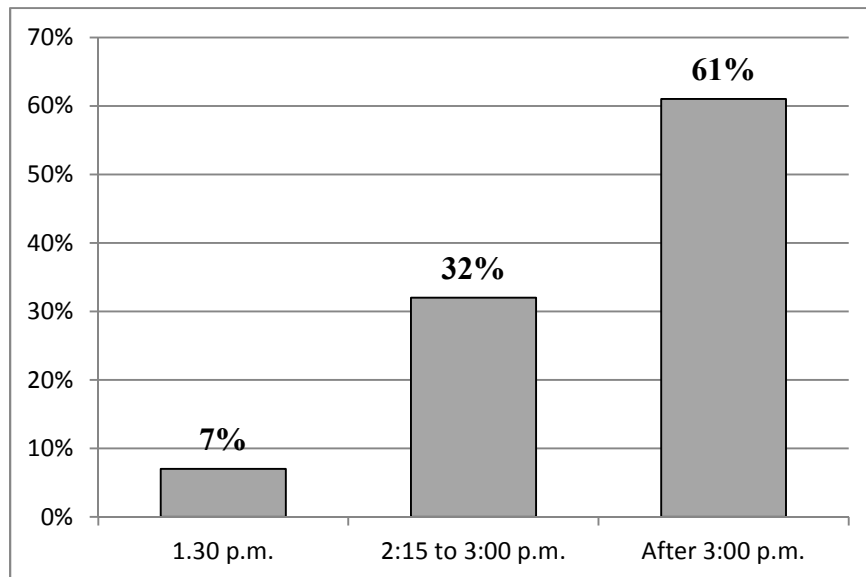


Figure 2. Time Students Get out of School in the Afternoon

There were two families who home-school their teens and responded to the survey. They indicated that their schedules may not start quite as early in the morning as other students, but students do spend between seven and ten hours a day on school work. These responses from the home-school families are not represented in the tables above.

Extracurricular Activities

Question #3 of the survey asked whether or not teens were involved in extracurricular activities. For the purposes of this survey, “extracurricular activity” was defined as any school or club sport; any organized activity in the arts such as drama, dance, or band; or any job worked for pay. Time spent in church or youth group activities was not included in the definition of “extracurricular activity.” Parents reported that nearly 90 percent of Conejo Valley Church of Christ high school students are involved in some type of extracurricular activity.

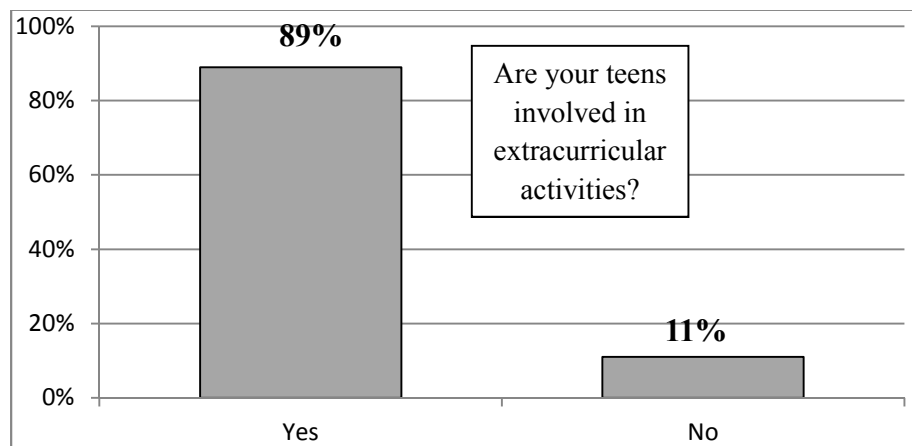


Figure 3. Extracurricular Involvement

The majority of teens who are involved in extracurricular activities normally go directly from school to practice, rehearsal, or competition. The next set of questions focused on how much time these activities require. Figure 4 shows the percentage of

students involved in extracurricular activities on any given day. Figure 5 shows the ending times of extracurricular activities and the percentage of students who finish at a particular time on any given day.

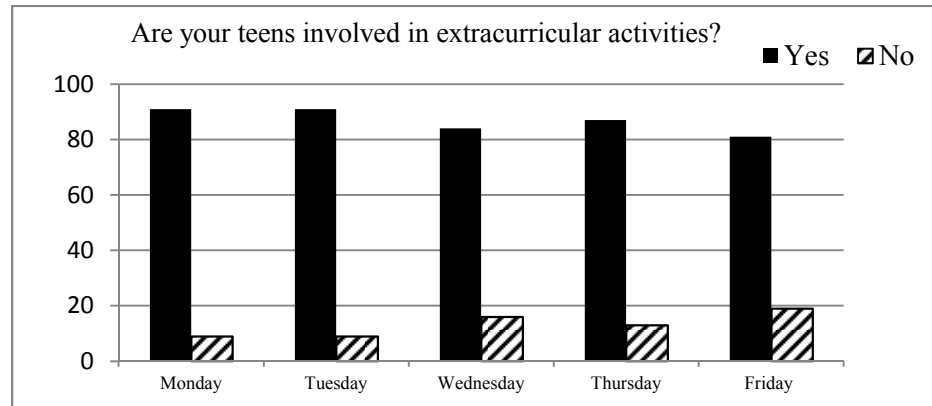


Figure 4. Extracurricular Involvement per Weekday

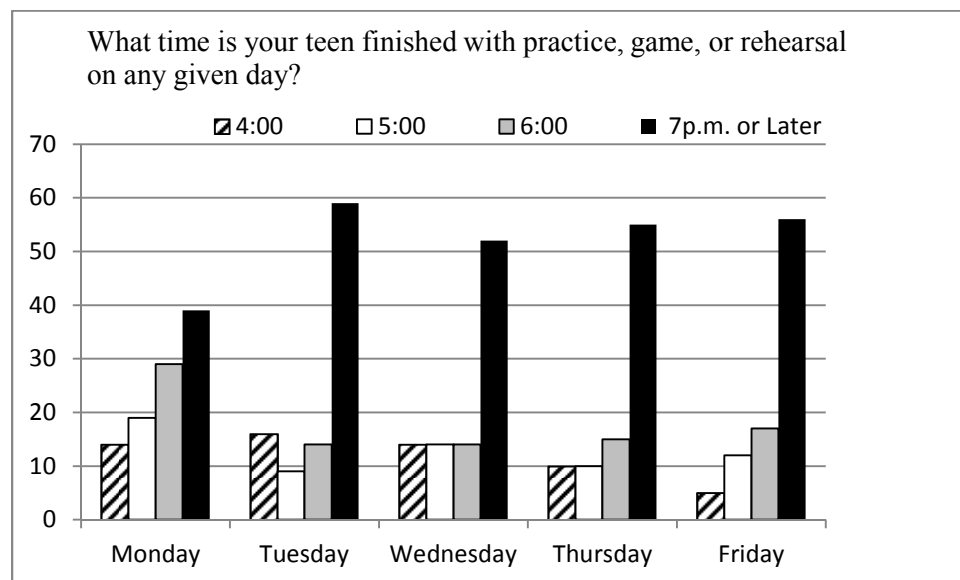


Figure 5. Extracurricular Finishing Time on Weekdays

The majority of Conejo students are involved in some kind of activity every weeknight after school. Most students do not get home at night until after 7:00 p.m. This stretches their school day into a twelve-hour day. In addition to this, most still have homework beyond this busy schedule on a regular basis.

The time commitments and busyness do not let up when the school week is over. Parents reported that 83 percent of their Conejo high school students have time commitments on Saturdays and Sundays for their extracurricular activities. Of these students, 14 percent have a commitment on average one Saturday per month and 18 percent have Saturday commitments three times per month. A striking 40 percent of involved students have a time commitment for some extracurricular activity on average four Saturdays per month.

While significantly fewer have scheduling conflicts on Sunday mornings—30 percent being involved in extracurricular activities on one or two Sundays per month—there is still a residual effect for Sunday involvement. Many have a heavy homework load to handle during times when Conejo traditionally has scheduled youth group or church events. A significant 34 percent report that the need to do homework conflicts with Sunday night devotional times at least one Sunday per month.

The midweek “Youth Nite” gathering, on Wednesday nights, is more greatly impacted. Of those surveyed, 17 percent reported homework conflicting with Youth Nite at least once per month. A full 48 percent of families reported that the need to do homework or study conflicts with Youth Nite more than once per month.

One more contributing factor to students’ extracurricular busyness is the high expectation of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes. Students are generally eligible for these courses in their sophomore, junior, and senior years of high school. Of the twenty-six eligible Conejo church students attending public or private high schools, twenty-one of them are taking AP or IB courses. Such courses require extended study time and preparation beyond normal hours of homework in order to fulfill high

expectations for academic achievement. At the time of this writing, 80 percent of high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors who attend the Conejo Valley Church of Christ are involved in AP or IB classes at school. This is 20 percent to 40 percent higher than the percentage for students in the general population of the Conejo Valley.

Busy Schedules Squeeze Out Family Spiritual Time at Home

Clearly, Conejo students have busy schedules which conflict with church attendance. This busyness also leaves them with little time to develop personal habits of spiritual discipline and limits time for intentional spiritual practices with their family. In the two weeks following the involvement surveys, students were asked if their busyness inhibited their family's time together. These conversations were conducted with individual students either in person or over the phone in order to help ensure that each student's answers were not influenced by the presence of peers.¹⁵

All students agreed that the busyness of their extracurricular schedule and commitments to academic achievement hindered their family's time together. Most commented that they had little or no consistent time together as a family. No student said their family currently had a consistent time to share Scripture reading or spiritual discussions. Most had no significant time for prayer beyond prayer before meals and bedtime. As one sophomore girl put it, "When I was little we had a family night once a week where a different member of the family would be responsible for the devotional.

¹⁵ Conejo Valley Church of Christ students, interviews by author, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2013.

That never happens now. Now we barely even have dinner together a couple times a week.”¹⁶

Not all of the students seemed to miss these times or feel that they were as important as this girl did. One junior agreed that her family’s schedules are much busier than when she was younger, but she said, “It’s not that big of a deal. Family devotionals or formal discussions have never been part of our family tradition. We are all really busy. It just means we have to have life discussions when we are driving or whenever we can fit them in.”¹⁷ Whether students feel that they have lost something in the transition to busyness or not, it is clear that the context in which Conejo church families live presents a challenge to the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines.

Youth Ministry Vision: Toward a Solution

The spiritual formation of children and families always has been a valued priority for the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. The youth ministry vision statement reads: “Introducing students to Jesus for life, so they can: Come to know Him; Learn to follow; and Live to serve.”¹⁸ The major impetus for this vision is the example of Jesus. This ministry seeks to help teens hear the call of God in their lives. Curriculum and ministry events are designed to help students learn to follow Jesus and be equipped as He equipped His disciples. The ultimate goal is to guide them into lives of service in the Kingdom for lifelong spiritual impact.

¹⁶ Oak Park High School student, interviewed by author, Thousand Oaks, CA, October 7, 2013.

¹⁷ Malibu High School student, interview by author, Thousand Oaks, CA, October 7, 2013.

¹⁸ Conejo Valley Church of Christ, “Youth Ministries.”

In order to be most effective with students, the ministry must connect with students' families. For this reason, four times per year the Conejo youth ministry offers specific events for families to experience spiritual formation together, where they can practice Scripture reading, discussion, meditation, and prayer. These "Family Faith Experiences" are tied directly to themes in the Sunday morning curriculum. They give families touch-points for shared spiritual experiences throughout the year. They offer families the chance to practice spiritual disciplines together and encourage them to carry on these practices at home. These activities and events lay a familiar foundation for small group experiences and provide a springboard for the goal of this doctoral project.

Faith Formation and Identity Development in Adolescents

Practicing spiritual disciplines as a family is important for adolescent faith formation and identity development. That is why these events always have been a priority for the Conejo youth ministry. As noted in Chapter 1, family context and the everyday events children experience within that context are major contributing factors to the identity formation of children.¹⁹ This truth carries on through adolescence.

Even though a key part of adolescent development is individuation from families, parents still play a major role in how teens see the world and themselves in it.²⁰

Regarding this important truth about parental influence, Smith and Denton write:

Parents are normally very important in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of their teenage children. . . . Simply by living and interacting with their children, most parents establish expectations, define normalcy, model life practices, set boundaries and make demands—all of which cannot help but influence teenagers

¹⁹ Schachter and Ventura, "Identity Agents," 450.

²⁰ Pasupathi and Hoyt, "The Development of Narrative Identity," 457.

. . . a lot of research in the sociology of religion suggests that the most important social influence in shaping young people's lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents.²¹

Parental influence and the family context are not the only contributing factors to adolescent faith formation and identity development, but these important factors are a key focus in the Conejo youth ministry and this doctoral project.

Conejo's Readiness for Scripture Reading, Meditation, and Prayer

From its inception in the nineteenth century, the American Restoration Movement placed a high value on the importance of the Bible.²² In line with this heritage, the Conejo Valley Church of Christ has done the same. However, not all of the methods for interpreting or understanding Scripture passed down from leaders in the nineteenth century have been upheld as standard practice today. In many ways, Conejo has grown and changed in concert with the growth and influence of Pepperdine University and Conejo members who are connected to the institution.

The Conejo Valley Church of Christ is on the progressive edge of members in Churches of Christ on the west coast. Throughout the congregation's history, several elders, ministers, teachers, and lay leaders have been faculty at Pepperdine. The influences of faculty members from the Religion Division and other departments at Pepperdine have helped broaden the worldview of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. It also has affected how Conejo's ministers and lay leaders interpret and teach Scripture.

²¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 56.

²² Garrett, *Stone-Campbell Movement*, 113.

These combining forces make exploration and trying new ideas welcome concepts at Conejo. The central focus on the importance of Scripture as a guide for spiritual life informs the practice of ministry. The freedom to pull from the latest scholarship and research in theology and textual studies offers credence and integrity to Conejo's teaching and preaching. Both ministers and members are encouraged to engage God for themselves through the pages of Scripture.

Many of Conejo's members are familiar with the spiritual disciplines of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer as foundational practices for their spiritual lives. One example of this is a publication entitled *Power for Today*. This daily devotional was first published in 1955 with the intention of encouraging families in the Churches of Christ to share daily Bible study and prayer together.²³ From 1955 to 1972 the managing editors were M. Norvel and Helen Young. In 1972, Young's daughter Emily Lemley, and her husband, Steve Lemley, took over editorial duties for *Power for Today*. They continue as editors to the present. Quarterly, thirty copies of this daily devotional guide are delivered to the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. They are available to families free of charge. All thirty copies go to families who use them for their personal edification.²⁴

Power for Today is a strong example of the connection between Pepperdine and the Conejo church regarding the practice of personal spiritual disciplines. Young served

²³ Power for Today, "About Us," <http://www.powerfortoday.com/page2.html> (accessed May 20, 2014).

²⁴ The popularity and continued use of *Power for Today* was confirmed through Conejo Valley Church of Christ ministry staff and office administrator, interviews by author, Thousand Oaks, CA, May 20, 2014.

as the president of Pepperdine University from 1957 to 1971.²⁵ S. Lemley and E. Lemley are longtime members of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. The devotional guide they provide is just one example of Conejo's heritage of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer.

The various ministries of the Conejo church also focus regularly on these personal spiritual disciplines. Public Scripture readings are an integral part of Conejo's Sunday morning worship assemblies. Weekly adult Bible classes encourage Scripture memory and reflection throughout the week. Both the children's ministry and the youth ministry encourage families to read and study together. Several ministry events are designed annually to help families learn how to reflect on Scripture, memorize Scripture, and pray together. All of these factors combine to lay a strong foundation for the proposed practices in this project.

²⁵ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 250-251.

PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

A major task of adolescence is identity formation. As teens move toward adulthood they challenge the assumptions handed to them by the adults in their world. They decide for themselves what is right and wrong, good and bad, useful and irrelevant. Many of the assumptions they have heard from their parents, friends, and the media are adopted. Other assumptions are abandoned in favor of ethics and beliefs they deem to be more valuable, right, or effective. In this process of individuation, they continue to shape their belief about who they are and what kind of person they will be as an adult.

The seven key sources discussed in this chapter help define the suggested plan of practice for teens in the hope of enhancing their identity development as people of faith. The first three sources speak directly to recent research regarding American teenagers and spirituality. The fourth resource helps define the process of creating small groups for discussion and practice of spiritual disciplines in the context of this project. The fifth source speaks directly to the Churches of Christ heritage, which sets the milieu for the Conejo Valley Church of Christ and its members. The last two sources speak from a

broader Evangelical Christian tradition and offer insight into specific habits of spiritual formation.

Adolescent Development and Spiritual Formation

Soul Searching by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton

Soul Searching reports the findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), the largest study of American teenagers and religion ever completed, at the date of this writing.¹ This study, conducted from 2001 to 2005, includes telephone interviews with teens and their parents across the United States. Trained interviewers conducted follow-up interviews in person with telephone respondents in forty-five states. The research team then collected and analyzed all the information to determine trends and attitudes in the religious practices and ideas of American teenagers. Regarding their findings, Smith and Denton write: “Altogether the data collected provide for a dependable representation and analysis of the contours and character of adolescent spirituality in the United States today. We address all of the major American religious traditions and two minority traditions, Mormonism and Judaism.”²

Main Argument

The findings of this study reveal a mix of good and bad news regarding the state of the religious lives of teens. In short, the good news is that religion is a significant factor in the lives of American teenagers. A full three-quarters of the students surveyed,

¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 7.

² Ibid.

between ages thirteen and seventeen, identify themselves as Christian—either Protestant or Catholic.³ They tend to easily adopt and contentedly profess the faith of their families. The bad news is that the faith they hold is likely not actual, traditional, orthodox Christian faith.

The good news is that very few of the teenagers surveyed show any sign of feeling alienated, rebellious, or seeking change when it comes to religious belief. Smith and Denton write: “What we learned . . . is that the vast majority of American teenagers are *exceedingly conventional* in their religious identity and practices . . . basically content to follow the faith of their families with little questioning.”⁴ This is the good news: the vast majority of American teenagers are adopting the faith of their families. This shows that when it comes to religious views and practices, parents are the strongest motivating factor in the lives of teens.

Although the vast majority of teenagers profess to hold the faith of their families, that faith does not seem to be terribly important to them. In the words of Smith and Denton: “Most teens seem simply to accept religion as a taken-for-granted aspect or presence that mostly operates in the background of their lives.”⁵ They can profess Christianity, but it may not really mean much. Supporting this conclusion, researchers in the NSYR found that most teenagers were not able to speak articulately about their faith. Regarding teenager’s attitudes, *Soul Searching* reports: “For very many US teens, religion is important but not a priority, valued but not much invested in, praised but not

³ Ibid., 31.

⁴ Ibid., 120.

⁵ Ibid., 129.

very describable.”⁶ Very few teenagers interviewed could communicate a clear connection between their religious beliefs or practices and their everyday lives.⁷

The most difficult finding is that the faith of American teenagers is likely weak and undefinable, because it is based on a weak and poorly articulated faith passed to them from the adults in their lives. Smith and Denton take up this point, while summarizing their findings, to suggest that the faith passed down from adults and practiced by a majority of American teenagers is not orthodox Christianity but rather a de facto dominant religion they call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.⁸ They describe the creed of this religion in five statements: God exists, created and ordered the world, and watches over human life on earth; God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to one another, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions; the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself; God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to solve a problem; and finally, good people go to heaven when they die.⁹

In summary, the good news and the bad news of the results of the NSYR are largely the same. The good news is that teens are adopting the faith of their families, particularly that of their parents, with little conflict or dissention. The bad news is that they are adopting the faith of their parents; and most often, it is not a vibrant, orthodox, Christian faith.

⁶ Ibid., 262.

⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁹ Ibid.

Contributions and Limitations of Source for This Project

In the midst of the major findings of the NSYR are three conclusions that directly relate to the topic of this doctoral project. First, this research confirms, as noted in Chapter 2, that today's American teenagers are highly programmed with busy schedules. It is also very significant that parents are the greatest influence on the religious and spiritual lives of teens. Finally, it is important to note the finding that churches that place a high priority on providing engaging activities and programs produce students who are more heavily invested in their faith and religious practice. This higher investment in turn has tremendous positive outcomes in the lives of religious teens. On the topic of busyness and over-programming, Smith and Denton note that religion is often a peripheral issue in the lives of teens due to the great influence of other social factors. They write that religion is often marginal in teens' lives due to the strong mix of "activities and organizations that organize teenagers' schedules and priorities."¹⁰ They note that teens and parents often are not consciously aware of the strong influence of these large, contextual, social factors, but they are still a strong contributing factor in contemporary lives and priorities regarding religion.

In this regard, it is a powerful finding to confirm that parents have a great deal of influence on their teens in matters of faith. This project seeks to help parents understand their lives in terms of participation and purpose in the grand story of God and in turn help their teens do the same. It is encouraging to note that such parental influence is still a natural part of American adolescent life. This speaks well for the potential of this project

¹⁰ Ibid., 263.

to have a positive impact on the lives of parents and teens at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ.

The final finding is also very encouraging, as it relates to this project. Teens who are involved in churches that offer engaging, faith-forming activities and programs tend to take faith more seriously. In turn, those who are more greatly influenced by their faith tend to be “healthier, more engaged adolescents who live more constructive and promising lives.”¹¹ That makes a strong, positive rationale. The program of reflection and spiritual disciplines outlined here is exactly the kind of activity Smith and Denton refer to as powerful and effective in the lives of teens.

The compiled findings from the NSYR offer tremendous insight into the religious landscape of the world of American adolescents. The conclusions are challenging and enlightening. As this work relates to the present doctoral project, Smith and Denton have done a tremendous job outlining the problems with regard to religious faith in the minds and lives of American teens. Their work, however, largely stops there. While their goal was to outline and define the religious and spiritual lives of teenagers in the United States, they do not go on to offer many viable, concrete solutions. In what they title a “Concluding, Unscientific Postscript,”¹² Smith and Denton offer several significant observations which can help stimulate further discussion; but they still fall short of outlining any specific plan to help engage teens in a deep, viable, orthodox Christian faith. This is more of an observation than a critique. A viable plan of action, it seems, is outside the scope of their intent for the NSYR.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 265.

Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers by Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford

Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition is based on the College Transition Project, a six-year research initiative launched by the Fuller Youth Institute in 2004. This initiative included a comprehensive study of over five hundred high school graduates. At the heart of the project were two longitudinal studies with a total of 384 youth group students from their senior year in high school through their first three years of college.¹³ The impetus for the study was a set of alarming statistics from various studies showing that between 40 and 50 percent of students who are involved in a Christian youth group in high school fail to remain faithful after they enter college.¹⁴ The Fuller Youth Institute launched this initiative to help increase understanding about the dynamics youth group graduates face as they transition into college. They also wanted to move beyond understanding to providing insight and strategies that can help parents, churches, and youth ministries equip students for this transition.

Main Argument

The nine chapters of *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition* offer an effective mix of research statistics and practical strategies for ministry. The overarching theme is that teenagers need positive, constructive engagement with adults. If they are not connecting

¹³ Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition*, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 15. The team of researchers behind the College Transition Project note that they reached this conclusion by compiling data from several different studies: Barna Group, “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years,” https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years#.U2qs1V7n_X4 (accessed May 6, 2014); George H. Gallup, Jr., “The Religiosity Cycle,” Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/6124/religiosity-cycle.aspx> (accessed May 6, 2014); Frank Newport, “A Look at Religious Switching in America Today,” Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/23467/look-religious-switching-america-today.aspx> (accessed May 6, 2014); Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

with adults while in their high school years, they are not likely to transition well into the adult church after they graduate.

Each chapter discusses important, critical topics such as the nature of the Gospel,¹⁵ the role of the local church,¹⁶ and identity formation in adolescence.¹⁷ Throughout each of these topics, the authors discuss the importance of significant relationships between adults and adolescents. Every chapter highlights the importance of adults being role models, mentors, and engaged partners in the faith journey of adolescents.

Contributions and Limitations of Source for This Project

In 2012, the Conejo Valley Church of Christ youth ministry offered a Sunday morning class for parents of teenagers, based on the *Sticky Faith* book by Powell and Chap Clark that was written for parents.¹⁸ The ideas presented there and further conversations with parents since that time form part of the impetus for this doctoral project. Many of the ideas from that *Sticky Faith* volume and this one written for youth workers have helped parents and leaders in the Conejo Valley youth ministry to see a greater value in fostering adult-student connection. This continues to be part of the goal and ministry strategy used at Conejo and will be a valuable resource as the small groups are formed for this project.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 29-37.

¹⁶ Ibid., 73-78.

¹⁷ Ibid., 50-61.

¹⁸ Kara Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas To Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

¹⁹ Further details regarding the role of small groups is provided in Part Three of this discussion.

Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition suggests that the connection between teens and adults is crucial for adolescent faith development. Their research makes a strong case that significant relationships between teens and adults, including their parents and others, are a major factor in helping teens develop a faith that lasts beyond their high school years.²⁰ They also note that deep conversation with adults, including with their parents, is crucial. Teens need to feel free to ask tough questions, express doubts, and work through deeper issues of faith in connection with caring adults.²¹ They particularly noted that the most important interaction with parents is not just talking about their questions but hearing their parents and other adults share how they struggle with big questions and doubt at times. This modeling is extremely important if teens are to make the transition to becoming adults who take faith seriously.²²

In addition to connection with adults, Powell, Griffin, and Crawford suggest in *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition* that effective youth ministries need to center their ministry activities around prayer and Scripture. College students noted that what they wished they had more of, when they looked back at their high school years, were times of deep spiritual conversation.²³ Most students reported not learning to develop solid habits in the core practices of faith.²⁴ The research indicates that the typical youth ministry does not spend enough time talking about deep issues or helping teens develop habits of Scripture reading, reflection, or prayer.

²⁰ Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition*, 76-78.

²¹ Ibid., 141, 145-146.

²² Ibid., 116-119.

²³ Ibid., 139-141.

²⁴ Ibid., 142-143.

Much of the insight and revelation coming from the research in *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition* is not new information for the parents and leaders at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. The only limitation to this material may be that it is not particularly challenging within the context of the Conejo youth ministry. One strength of the Churches of Christ religious tradition is that children and teens always have been an integral part of corporate worship. Teens are encouraged to be equal members with adults on worship teams in corporate worship on Sunday mornings. They often have led worship activities such as Scripture reading, prayer, presenting communion meditations, and serving at the table for communion in the assembly. On several occasions, students have given testimonies, have reported on their involvement of mission efforts, and have taken part in presenting the main sermon in the Sunday morning assembly.

It is surprising to anyone from Conejo's local congregational context that these activities are seen as radical or revolutionary ideas in so many churches. Including children and teens in corporate worship and practice in the church is a strongly positive aspect of the Churches of Christ heritage. This does not discount the potency and importance of any findings from the *Sticky Faith* initiative; rather, it is a great encouragement to see so many of Conejo's church practices affirmed from such an authoritative outside source.

The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence
by Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al.

The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence is a collection of professional research articles focusing on the spiritual development of children and adolescents. Contributors come from a wide variety of disciplines. They span the

spectrum of psychology, educational psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The preface sets forth the purpose of the source. It states: “It is our hope here to offer a comprehensive review of current scientific knowledge and to propose directions for the future.”²⁵

Main Argument

The handbook contains thirty-four articles categorized into six sections. Part I discusses foundational aspects of personality and spiritual development in children and adolescence.²⁶ Part II presents perspectives on various approaches to the study of spiritual development.²⁷ Part III contains articles that explore connections between spirituality and human development.²⁸ Part IV explores the influence of ethnicity, family of origin, friends, and religious congregations regarding spiritual development.²⁹ Part V posits various outcomes of spiritual development in adolescents, such as moral integrity, resilience, and physical and emotional well-being.³⁰ Part VI offers insight and suggestions for further research in this field.³¹

Parts III and IV are the most useful sections for the focus of this doctoral project. Part III highlights research exploring the connection between adolescent spiritual development and environmental factors which affect overall development, such as

²⁵ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al., “Preface,” in *The Handbook on Spiritual Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), xiii.

²⁶ Ibid., 19-104.

²⁷ Ibid., 20-178.

²⁸ Ibid., 179-278.

²⁹ Ibid., 279-336.

³⁰ Ibid., 337-416.

³¹ Ibid., 417-498.

relationships with parents and other adults. Part IV outlines research into social contexts that have an effect on spiritual development, such as peer groups, social groups, and mentors. Two of these articles are highlighted below.

Contributions and Limitations of Source for This Project

Several articles in this collection help inform the practice and direction of this doctoral project. An article by Carl N. Johnson and Chris J. Boyzatis entitled “Cognitive-Cultural Foundation of Spiritual Development” outlines the importance of the family of origin and parents in the development of adolescent identity and its connection to spiritual development.³² Another article of interest is “Congregations: An Unexamined Crucible for Spiritual Development,” by Eugene C. Roehlkepartain and Eboo Patel.³³ Collectively, the authors explore the positive impact connection to a faith community has in the lives of adolescents. Other articles discuss the power of parents, non-parental mentors, or peers in the spiritual development of children and adolescents.³⁴ Overall, this collection of scholarly articles offers great insights that empower the vision and direction of this doctoral project.

In particular, the articles in the *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* provide deep insight into the factors that enhance spiritual formation.

³² Johnson and Boyzatis, “Cognitive-Cultural Foundation of Spiritual Development,” 211-223.

³³ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain and Eboo Patel, “Congregations: An Unexamined Crucible for Spiritual Development,” in *The Handbook on Spiritual Development*, eds. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 324-336.

³⁴ Kelly Dean Schwartz, William W. Badowski, and Wayne T. Aoki, “Mentors, Friends, and Gurus: Peer and Nonparent Influences on Spiritual Development,” in *The Handbook on Spiritual Development*, eds. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 310-323; Chris J. Boyatzis, David C. Dollahite, and Loran D. Marks, “The Family as a Context for Religious and Spiritual Development in Children and Youth,” in *The Handbook on Spiritual Development*, eds. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 297-309.

They also help outline several beneficial outcomes of positive spiritual formation. This is not, however, a guide to practical action. Even in the area of research, the editors challenge their colleagues to broaden this area of study because it is not being taken seriously by many in the scientific community.³⁵ This handbook is a solid resource for philosophical and emotional foundations of spiritual development, but it does not offer any practical insights that help inform the practice of spiritual disciplines or the activities at the heart of this doctoral project.

Small Groups for Modeling and Learning: *The Big Book on Small Groups* by Jeffery Arnold

Jeffery Arnold's *The Big Book on Small Groups* is basically a guidebook designed to help develop and train leaders for small group ministry. Arnold defines a small group as "an intentional gathering of three to twelve people who commit themselves to work together to become better disciples of Jesus Christ."³⁶ However, Arnold's focus is more on the reasons for small groups than the logistics of its practice.³⁷ He makes a strong case that the major purpose for small groups is to make better disciples. This demands a process in which leaders carry others along to a greater point of commitment and ministry in the context of the close-knit community of a small group.

³⁵ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al., "Introduction to Part VI," in *The Handbook on Spiritual Development*, eds. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 419.

³⁶ Jeffery Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Main Argument

In the first-century world of the Gospels, a disciple was an apprentice who enjoyed a close, mentoring relationship with a master or teacher.³⁸ Jesus employed this strategy of apprenticeship and chose the twelve to be His close companions from His larger crowd of followers (Mark 9:2). Even within this group He had a closer circle with Peter, James, and John (Mark 14:32-34). Through His intimate interaction with these men in relationship over time, Jesus trained them by example and practice to be ready to lead and disciple others, just as they had been taught. For Arnold, this is a solid biblical rationale for discipleship through small group ministry today. He argues for three key truths that help disciple-makers ensure a proper focus for small groups: “Disciples are made intentionally. . . . Disciples are to be like Christ. . . . Disciples are made in relationship.”³⁹

Disciple-making is an intentional process. Arnold writes: “Just as children do not grow up without personal care, nor do they learn mathematics on their own, so discipleship will not occur without faithful Christians being intentional about it.”⁴⁰ He goes on to define a disciple as “a committed follower of Jesus Christ who seeks to live a life marked by continued growth in understanding and obedience.”⁴¹ This definition helps shape the intent and purpose of a small group. Whether the group comes together for Bible study, for personal accountability, to work on a mission project, or for any number

³⁸ Ibid. 15.

³⁹ Ibid., 20-21.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

of other specific purposes, the Christian small group is concerned first about helping each member become a better disciple of Jesus through the focused activity of the small group.

Discipleship to Jesus is the crucial concept. Arnold points out that Christian leaders must be careful not to duplicate themselves in the discipleship process.⁴² Instead, through reflection, Bible study, and the give and take of small group experiences, believers are to be shaped by Scripture and grow to be more like Jesus.

Another important aspect of small groups is personal connection. In a small group, people can grow closer to one another and truly share important truths, struggles, and questions. Jesus had this kind of relationship with His disciples. He sets the example for human relationships in small groups.

Contributions and Limitations of Source to This Project

Arnold points out that discipleship is even more effective if it is carried out in the context of the family. He states that throughout the Bible it is understood that “people need a close community in order to grow . . . in our society, the family is the first such community. . . . Our job as parents is to provide an atmosphere in which each child can be nurtured through to adulthood.”⁴³ From the earliest days of God’s covenant with the nation of Israel, Scripture instructs parents to teach their children and raise them in faith (cf. Deuteronomy 4:5-9; 6:1-4; 11:18-21). Parents are the primary leaders, intended by God, to pass faith on to their children.

The importance of this mandate from Scripture is affirmed by the recent research noted above regarding the importance of adult involvement in the lives of teens. The

⁴² Ibid., 21.

⁴³ Ibid., 74.

implication is clear. Given the proper training and insight, parents and other interested adults are well-suited to act as small group leaders and mentors for teens. Interested adults who learn how biblical characters can serve as mentors in their own lives can be effective disciple-makers for their own children and other teens as they pass on these skills and insights to them.

Arnold describes six different types of small groups, each formed for a specific purpose. For this doctoral project, the most effective type of group is what he calls the “Discipleship Group.”⁴⁴ As Arnold explains, this group tends to involve less than five members who seek a specific goal for personal and spiritual growth.⁴⁵ The purpose for this is to allow leaders to develop a close, personal relationship with those they mentor. Such a group shares not only time and study together, they also learn to share life by reading Scripture, praying together, and talking about life issues over an extended period of time. The goal of such a group is that they learn to echo the words of the apostle Paul in 1Thessalonians 2:8: “We were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God, but our lives as well.”⁴⁶

While Arnold does a good job of outlining the importance of advancing discipleship through small groups, one weakness directly related to this doctoral project is that he speaks of discipleship as though Jesus were the only model from the Bible that matters. Since the example of Jesus is primary, He is the first and most important model. However, life stories from a myriad of other people in the Bible are powerful and instructive.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 194-195.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ All Scripture citations are taken from *Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI:1984), unless otherwise noted.

Acknowledging the vast discipleship resources that the broader whole of Scripture contains offers a greater potential for spiritual impact and connection to the grand story of God.

Another limitation is a lack of depth regarding spiritual disciplines. While Arnold does provide chapters on small groups that study the Bible,⁴⁷ worship together,⁴⁸ and pray,⁴⁹ his suggestions are practical at a beginning level. They fall short of giving any deep or meaningful insight into the practice of classic spiritual disciplines or how their use could enhance discipleship in small groups.

The Importance of Biblical Narrative in the Churches of Christ Tradition

Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America
by Richard T. Hughes

In *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, Hughes sets out to write a history of the Churches of Christ in the United States. This is a difficult task because over the years the denomination has divided and subdivided to the point that there are as many as eight major subdivisions in this tradition.⁵⁰ To narrow his focus, Hughes follows the mainstream, traditional Non-Instrumental, Churches of Christ. His main argument

⁴⁷ Ibid., 117-130, 164-170, 180-182.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 131-146.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 147-160.

⁵⁰ J. Gordon Melton, *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 8th ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009), 507-512. The eight major subdivisions are Evangelical Christian Church, Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ Non-Instrumental, Churches of Christ Non-Instrumental Conservative, Churches of Christ Non-Instrumental One Cup for Communion, Churches of Christ Non-Instrumental No Sunday School, and Churches of Christ Pentecostal.

focuses on various themes that have shaped the history of these mainstream Churches of Christ.

Main Argument

Hughes contends that four major themes have shaped the character of this movement from its beginnings. For most of its history, members and leaders of the Churches of Christ either have denied or failed to recognize the importance of these themes in shaping the movement. Hughes traces these themes and points out their significance through the history of the movement, from the nineteenth century to the present.

The first theme is the idea of restoring primitive Christianity. This idea was a defining factor for Churches of Christ from its beginning until late in the twentieth century. Hughes describes this as “the attempt to recover in the modern age the Christian faith as it was believed and practiced in the first century.”⁵¹ This search to restore the primitive Church is at the heart of the biblical hermeneutic and practices of most Churches of Christ to this day.

The second theme is the greatest tradition common among the Churches of Christ, the denial that they had a shared tradition, and it is fraught with irony. The Churches of Christ based their identity solely in their connection with the New Testament Church. In doing so, they denied having any other history or tradition. As Hughes aptly describes throughout his work, early in the nineteenth century, the Churches of Christ began as a sect and slowly became a denomination over the course of the twentieth century. The

⁵¹ Ibid.

irony comes in the fact that adherents of Churches of Christ refused to believe they were either a sect or denomination. They contended that they were restoring primitive Christianity and therefore could not be a denomination with human founders. This gave rise to the claim that they were nothing more or less than the true, original Church described in the New Testament. Describing this irony, Hughes writes:

Churches of Christ generally have denied that they have a defining history other than the Bible itself. . . . Many members of the Churches of Christ remain to this day virtually ignorant of Alexander Campbell, the early nineteenth century leader who helped give shape and texture to this movement in its founding years. . . . many of these people studiously avoid learning about Campbell or any other leader from their past; they fear that to acknowledge dependence on any human leader would make them a denomination with a human founder, rather than the true primitive church founded by Christ. This unique self-understanding has served to create institutional identity out of the denial of institutional identity.⁵²

The third theme is that, as a movement, the Churches of Christ was profoundly impacted by two significant leaders in the early years. Scholars and members of Churches of Christ who have acknowledged their history largely credit Campbell with being the major influence on the movement. Hughes contends that while Campbell's influence is strong, Stone was equally as influential.⁵³ Until the end of the twentieth century, many either downplayed or were unaware of Stone's influence.

The final theme Hughes carries through this history is that Campbell and Stone held very different views on key issues. Both founders believed that a return to primitive Christianity would bring an end to the divisions which existed in the true Church due to various denominations.⁵⁴ At the same time both men, and thus their respective followers,

⁵² Ibid., 2.

⁵³ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 98-99.

held differing views on significant theological matters. Hughes writes that the two men “understood the Christian message and oriented themselves to the world in very different ways. These differences contributed not only to the character of the Churches of Christ but also to division that ruptured this movement.”⁵⁵

Contributions and Limitations of Source to This Project

Throughout his telling of the history of the Churches of Christ, Hughes makes one point profoundly clear: Churches of Christ take the Bible very seriously. As the Word of God, it is the most important guide for directing the Church and the life of the believer. At the heart of the desire to restore primitive Christianity was a desire to do biblical things in Bible ways, following the example of Jesus, the apostles, and the earliest believers. The hope was to draw all people to one true Church, as described in the New Testament. They believed that the only way to bring the highest honor to Christ was to let the Bible alone be the guide in matters of faith.

This belief that the Bible is foundational and instructive is also at the heart of this doctoral project. Many of the simplistic ways the early Churches of Christ heritage viewed Scripture and some of the baggage connected with an old hermeneutic are no longer of interest for this project. Still their influence has led to a profound belief that Scripture is formational for the believer. Likewise, the Conejo Valley Church of Christ works on the assumption that narratives, particularly the life stories of people in Scripture, are especially useful in spiritual formation.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

Connected to this, Hughes does a tremendous job of showing his readers how the life stories of Campbell and Stone influenced a powerful movement on the American frontier. These two men helped launch a profound movement of God that is still growing and drawing people into the Kingdom of God today. In a biblical vein, this doctoral project seeks to do the same: honor the use of life stories of biblical characters as Hughes uses the stories of Campbell and Stone in his work. Biblical characters in the grand story of God are people who struggled and tried to make the best of life, just as members of Conejo church do. Their stories were preserved to be impactful and instructive as faithful living in certain times and circumstances.

In *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, Hughes tells an engaging story of the history of the Churches of Christ in the United States. His work has enlightened many in this tradition to the power of the narratives that shape their specific Christian heritage. While Hughes' overarching theme of narratives and attention to the importance of the Bible are cogent and methodical approaches that serve as models for this doctoral project, neither of these is a major focus of his work. Rather, *Reviving the Ancient Faith* is more useful and instructive from a church history standpoint. For this reason, the majority of its content is not directly relevant to the focus of this doctoral project.

The Practice of Spiritual Disciplines

The Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard

No professional baseball player performs the way he does in the game without rigorous, daily practice and repetition. It is through these disciplines that he is able to react so quickly and perform so well in the heat of a big game. It is the same with the

practice of disciplines in the spiritual lives of Christ followers. This is Dallas Willard's main point in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. He argues that, correctly understood, the spiritual disciplines are foundational activities for a believer's relationship with God and the Christian life.⁵⁶

Main Argument

Throughout his book, Willard argues astutely that the spiritual disciplines are not mere actions that gain favor with God. He writes: "The activities constituting the disciplines have no value in themselves. The aim and substance of the spiritual life is not fasting, prayer, hymn singing, frugal living and so forth. Rather, it is the effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of normal existence."⁵⁷ His point is that the focus of the spiritual life is relationship with God and not religious rituals or practices. Practicing the disciplines enhances and empowers the Christian's relationship with God. The disciplines are a means to an end and not an end in themselves.

Willard emphasizes that Jesus lived a rigorous life of discipline. His purpose was to empower His relationship with the Father. It was a life of discipline that His followers could emulate and from which they could benefit, developing a closer relationship with God.⁵⁸ The spiritual disciplines are willful acts of obedience that open the believer to the truth of the Spirit. Following through with these disciplines trains the mind, body, and

⁵⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), 3-4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

soul to be prepared to act in the Spirit when called upon to do so. Willard illustrates this by referencing Jesus' admonition to His disciples to pray on His last night in the Garden of Gethsemane. "The plain meaning of this advice to his sleepy and worried friends, was that by engaging in a certain type of action—the keeping of vigil combined with prayer—they would be able to attain a level of spiritual responsiveness and power in their lives that would be impossible without it."⁵⁹

For Willard, the true impetus of the spiritual life is not just being able to act in ways that one might not otherwise be able; it is in feeling, accepting, and living more deeply in the love of God. The spiritual disciplines are a tangible means of obedience that draw the believer more deeply into the love of God. In his words:

The disciplines for the spiritual life are available, concrete activities, designed to render bodily beings such as we ever more sensitive and receptive to the Kingdom of Heaven brought to us in Christ. . . . Lovingly practiced they join with grace to enable us to matter-of-factly "come boldly to the very throne of God". . . . His commandments are not "bad news" . . . once we have found ways to be with him.⁶⁰

In this way, Willard contends, the disciplines are the practice of being with God. They empower the believer to walk in relationship with Him and enter into the Kingdom of heaven present on earth.

Contributions and Limitations of Source to This Project

Looking at the lives of exemplary characters from the Bible reveals that they all practiced what are now known as the classical spiritual disciplines. Biblical people in the Old and New Testaments fasted, prayed, spent time in solitude, and sought God on a

⁵⁹ Ibid., 151.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 252.

regular basis (Moses: Deuteronomy 9:9-10; Esther: Esther 4:15-17; Jesus: Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16; Paul: Acts 9:1-9, Galatians 1:17). Each of them allowed their lives to be guided by the practice of spiritual disciplines, not as a desperate practice in times of need but as a way of life. This informs the strategy of this doctoral project by reminding me and other leaders at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ that we must focus on helping participants see that they need to develop a well-rounded spiritual life of discipline. This will be a new challenge for some. For others, it will be a welcome encouragement and reminder to continue doing what they have done in the past.

In particular, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* lends purpose to the practice of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer. While this is significant, Willard's resource offers no insights into the other important themes in this project. The importance of biblical narrative or the development of adolescent identity are not advanced, nor does Willard seek to offer this, as such themes are not within the scope of this work.

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster

Richard Foster starts the first page of *Celebration of Discipline* with these words: "Superficiality is the curse of our age. . . . The desperate need of our day is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people."⁶¹ He goes on to say that the classical spiritual disciplines call and empower people to deepen their spiritual life with God. His goal in this book is to help those who are interested be able to practice the disciplines in ways that will strengthen their walk with Christ and give them power to live richer, more intimate lives of faith.

⁶¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1988), 1.

Main Argument

R. Foster divides classical spiritual disciplines into three categories: inward disciplines,⁶² outward disciplines,⁶³ and corporate disciplines.⁶⁴ The inward disciplines include meditation, prayer, fasting, and study.⁶⁵ The outward disciplines are simplicity, solitude, submission, and service.⁶⁶ Corporate disciplines include confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.⁶⁷

The inward disciplines help the Christian slow down and connect with God.⁶⁸ They encourage taking time from the busyness of normal life to be quiet before God. Meditation, prayer, fasting, and study help re-center the believer in relationship with the Creator.⁶⁹ Fasting breaks unnecessary dependence on food or media or whatever is given up in favor of finding reliance on God. Meditation and prayer cause the body, mind, and spirit to slow down so the Christian can hear the still small voice of God. The discipline of study enables the Word of God to reform and shape the thoughts and habits of the believer to be in line with the will of God.

⁶² Ibid., 13.

⁶³ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 141.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 15-76.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 79-140.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 143-201.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 30.

The outward disciplines have to do with how one relates to the world. Simplicity is the discipline of being content with what God provides.⁷⁰ It is living the message of Christ in seeking first the Kingdom and not letting anything else master the believer. Solitude is not simply being alone. R. Foster writes: “Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. . . . Crowds, or lack of them, have little to do with this inner attentiveness.”⁷¹ Solitude is practicing being in the presence of God where He can be heard whether one is alone in a quiet place or in the midst of a busy room.⁷² Submission is the discipline of being able to put others before oneself. It is submission to the mind and will of Christ, putting personal desires behind those of God.⁷³ According to R. Foster, the discipline of service often is connected to the discipline of submission. Service is the outward action of inner submission.⁷⁴ Service is following the example of Christ by meeting the needs of those around us. However, the simple act of service is not the important discipline. The vital matter is that the service is done in order to honor God and cause personal pride to submit to the Holy Spirit.

The corporate disciplines are confession, worship, celebration, and guidance. Each of these disciplines is not necessarily corporate. One can practice these disciplines alone. One can confess to God alone. One can worship alone and celebrate what God has done when one is alone. Most believers are even more comfortable seeking God’s

⁷⁰ Ibid., 79-81.

⁷¹ Ibid., 96.

⁷² Ibid., 97.

⁷³ Ibid., 111-113.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 121, 126-127.

guidance on their own, through prayer and studying Scripture. However, R. Foster contends that these are all made more powerful when they become a shared experience with other believers.⁷⁵ In fact, Scripture commands believers to confess to one another (James 5:16) and to worship and celebrate God together (Hebrews 10:24-25). Corporate guidance is also patterned in Scripture as God led the entire nation of Israel together (Exodus 3:1-12) and Jesus gave His commission and offered His authority to them as the Church gathered (Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:36-52; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

Contributions and Limitations of Source to This Project

R. Foster masterfully describes both the practice and practical benefits of spiritual disciplines in this volume. His insights into the disciplines of meditation, study, and prayer are especially relevant to this doctoral project. This book is a solid resource to recommend to any who seeks greater insight into these disciplines.

Throughout each chapter, R. Foster cites biblical examples that enhance the theological insight he presents about the various disciplines. The chapter on meditation opens with an engaging survey of the biblical definition and purpose for meditation.⁷⁶ The chapter on prayer is filled throughout with biblical insights.⁷⁷ The section most useful for this project focuses on learning how to pray by following the example of Jesus.⁷⁸ Finally, in the chapter on study, R. Foster argues that the purpose of this discipline is to help renew the mind and transform the whole person by “replacing old,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 15-20.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 33-45.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 37-40.

destructive habits of thought with new, life-giving habits.”⁷⁹ He cites both Jesus and Paul as examples of this instruction (Romans 12:2; John 8:32).⁸⁰

For purposes of this doctoral project, *Celebration of Discipline* is limited only by the constraints of its subject matter. It is an insightful and useful guide for understanding and practicing spiritual disciplines. However, it does not inform the broader themes of this doctoral project. For instance, it gives instruction in the practices of spiritual disciplines but does not address any of the contextual issues teens and families at the Conejo church face in their over-programmed lifestyle. These themes are outside the scope of what R. Foster seems to intend for this work.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 62-63.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHURCH AS A TANGIBLE EXPRESSION OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The American Restoration Movement began with one noble goal in mind: unity of all believers under the banner of Jesus Christ. The strategy was to drop denominational ties, creeds, and doctrine and return to the pattern and practice of the original Church as described in the pages of the New Testament. Unfortunately, within one hundred years of its inception, this movement of unity began to fracture. The two movements led by Campbell and Stone came together into one during the winter of 1831.¹ By the end of 1889 there were already some sections of the country where congregations split off, claiming to be more faithful to Scripture than others.² In 1906 the rifts were so strong that when the Census of Religious Bodies was published it named the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ as separate denominations.³

¹ Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 250.

² Ibid., 591.

³ D. Foster, *The Story of the Churches of Christ*, 23.

Even in the midst of the many divisions of this movement, to this day members of the Churches of Christ seek to submit themselves to the rule of God in their lives and profess the power of His Kingdom. They seek to work within the guidelines of Scripture for corporate worship, church structure, and their daily walk of faith. This strong reliance on Scripture and belief in its formative power for the believer are at the heart of this doctoral project.

Another formative influence for this project is an optimistic view of the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world today. Two noted scholars from outside the Churches of Christ inform this perspective. The first is Willard. The second is N. T. Wright.

Both streams are formative for this doctoral project. The biblical heritage of the Churches of Christ provides the impetus for studying the life stories of biblical characters. The Kingdom view promoted by Willard and Wright provide a framework in which to see that the stories of biblical characters and the life stories of participants in this project are both seated in the larger story of God and His ever-expanding Kingdom.

An Ancient Stream: The Pattern of the First-Century Church

The reformers of the American Restoration Movement sought to establish Christian unity through a nondenominational vision of Christianity. Three key themes were implicit in their view of how this could be realized: the unity of all Christians; the restoration of primitive Christianity; and the freedom for all Christians to read, understand, and interpret

the Bible for themselves.⁴ These three principles send echoes through the history of the Churches of Christ and influence this discussion.

A Nondenominational Call for Unity

The most basic driving force in the American Restoration Movement was the call for Christian unity. Early restorationists believed that this unity would bring about remarkable changes to the modern world. In 1825 Campbell professed, “Just in so far as the ancient order of things, or the religion of the New Testament, is restored, just so far has the Millennium commenced.”⁵ Campbell and other early founders of the movement were driven by the optimism of the Enlightenment and a desire to see the Kingdom of God played out in the world.

In essence, they hoped all believers in Christ one day would drop their denominational ties and unite under the pattern of the one true Church described in the pages of the New Testament.⁶ In their view, this unity would be the basis for a golden millennial age. They longed to see the Kingdom of God come to its full power on earth through a faithful Church restored to its original pattern from the first century.

Primitivism in the American Restoration Movement

At first thought, primitivism is a simple and elegant idea. Stone, Campbell, and those who followed in their movement simply sought to follow the pattern God had

⁴ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 98.

⁵ Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things, No. 1,” *The Christian Baptist*, June 6, 1825, 221, quoted in Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 29.

⁶ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 221. Scholars and students of the American Restoration Movement agree that this view fueled the movement throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century: Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 122-125, and Robert E. Hooper, *A Distinct People: A History of the Churches of Christ in the 20th Century* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Co., 1993), 2-15.

handed down to believers through the Bible. They viewed the differences in all the denominations around them and perceived that division as the result of multiple creeds and the inventions of men beyond the simple, perfect message of the New Testament. They believed that if all believers would drop the creeds and doctrinal formulations of the denominations, unity would follow. Although to contemporary ears it may seem simplistic and naive, this idea is not without its attractive power.

Campbell was the most influential in defining primitivism. The principles and values of the Enlightenment, especially Scottish Common Sense Rationalism, had a great deal of impact on his views. Also known as “Baconianism,” most people today would recognize this as the scientific method.⁷ Campbell and his followers applied this principle to the Bible. To carry this out, one would collect all the facts that are present on a topic. In this case, all those facts would come from the text of the Bible. After examining the facts one could reach a logical conclusion as to the proper form of worship, function of believers, structure for church government or assemblies, and the like. Patterns would emerge from such study and then be seen as formative. Since these patterns came directly from Scripture, one could infer that they came directly from God.

From this construct grew a hermeneutic that dominated the Churches of Christ all the way into the 1980s. Many conservative Churches of Christ still hold to it today. The basic rules for understanding and interpreting Scripture were known as “command, example, and necessary inference.”⁸ This simple, threefold test clarified what God requires of Christians. First, if there was a clear command in Scripture it should be

⁷ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

carried out. Next, any consistent action or pattern in the practice of the early Church was viewed as setting an example for the Church today. Finally, in the absence of a direct command or example, any word or action of the early Christians clearly inferring that something was right or wrong became authoritative as well.

Many commands in the Old Testament would not make sense for the Christian Church. Therefore, this hermeneutic could raise all kinds of questions if applied to the entire Bible. For example, Leviticus 4 gives a lengthy introduction to the practice of sin offerings, commanding that they be offered at the temple. These laws no longer apply to the Christian Church, which is not bound to the cultic practices of temple sacrifice. Other laws also seem antiquated or even barbaric. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 commands that a rebellious son be taken to the city gate and stoned to death by the city elders to set an example against children being rebellious. Recognizing that not all biblical laws are appropriately applicable to the Christian Church, Stone, Campbell, and others held that only the New Testament was formative for the contemporary Church.

Campbell was the most influential in this regard. He focused restoration not only on the New Testament but more narrowly on the events of Acts 2 and beyond. Regarding Campbell's view, Hughes writes: "He divided the Bible into three dispensations: the patriarchal (from Adam to Moses), the Mosaic (from Moses to Peter's sermon on Pentecost, recorded in Acts chapter 2), and the Christian (from Pentecost to the Last Judgment)."⁹ This meant that any commands, clear examples, or necessarily inferred actions that existed in Scripture from the day of Pentecost forward were normative for the

⁹ Ibid., 31.

restored Church. Campbell held that the direction for faithful Christians was clearly outlined for any who took the time to read the pages of Scripture. In this way, the Bible functioned as a clear blueprint for restoring the primitive Church. His views and the ensuing hermeneutic dominated the way Churches of Christ interpreted the Bible.

Although a major factor in Churches of Christ doctrine is the belief that any believer could read and understand the Bible personally, this particular way of reading and interpreting was widely accepted as the only correct way. In the traditional view, this made everything clear and easy, because the patterns of belief and practice for the Church are written clearly in black and white on the pages of the Bible. This kind of patternism, although simple and desirable at first take, was actually not so simple in practice. It led to legalism and division in the unity movement.

Limitations of Strict Biblical Patternism

In the latter half of the twentieth century, there was increasing discomfort over the simple hermeneutic of command, example, and necessary inference within the Churches of Christ. Many scholars and preachers began to feel less comfortable with the legalistic patterns that emerged from this view and its inflexible view of the Church.¹⁰ The need to make important theological decisions based on silence in Scripture was one major problem with this hermeneutic. Another issue was the predominance of biblical commands over other more subtle yet theologically significant texts.

¹⁰ Thomas Olbricht, "Hermeneutics in the Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly* 37, no. 1, (1995): 1-24; Rubel Shelly and Randall Harris *The Second Incarnation: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century Church* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1992), 65-78; Douglas A. Foster, *Will the Cycle be Unbroken: Churches of Christ in the 21st Century* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1994), 99-130.

The Argument from Silence

The first problem is that strict biblical patternism does not allow for every form and structure of the modern Church. Since the Book of Acts and the epistles of the New Testament do not address all aspects of congregational life, many of the “necessary inferences” became arguments from silence. For instance, since the Bible does not mention Sunday school, fellowships halls, or even modern church buildings the question surfaced of whether or not believers are to infer that such things are prohibited or that silence in these areas means tacit approval.

This may seem trivial, but there are major divisions among Churches of Christ on these and other issues. Today there are conservative groups within Churches of Christ who refuse to offer Sunday school. Others disallow fellowship halls, kitchens in church buildings, or anything in worship that might be construed as entertaining, because they find no precedent for these things in the New Testament. In an effort to be faithful, these churches put up walls forbidding anything that is not given clear permission in Scripture. Whether or not one agrees with these walls then becomes a test of faithfulness and fellowship.

The most well-known argument from silence is in support of prohibiting instrumental music in the assembly. Many passages in the Old Testament give a clear example of instruments used, even commanded, for worship. These are seen as having no bearing on the Christian Church, because they are part of the old law.¹¹ There are passages that mention musical instruments in the New Testament, but they are not seen as

¹¹ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1989), 2-6. See also discussion of Campbell’s view of the different dispensations of Scripture mentioned earlier in this same chapter.

formative for the Church. Leading scholar and elder in the Churches of Christ Everett

Ferguson explains:

Musical Instruments occur in the New Testament as part of everyday life (Matt. 9:23; 11:17, Rev. 18:22) and as illustrations (1 Cor. 13:1; 14:7-8) but they are never mentioned as part of the assemblies of the church or accompanying Christian religious music. Their only appearance in a worship context is in the Book of Revelation, where, drawing on the imagery of the Temple, the voices of the heavenly creatures are compared to stringed instruments (Rev. 15:2-3); the instruments symbolize singing in the same way the incense does prayer (Rev. 5:8-9). The testimony of early Christian literature is expressly to the absence of instruments from the church for approximately the first thousand years of Christian History.¹²

Many congregations in the Churches of Christ do not hold to the kinds of constraints that these more conservative churches see in Scripture. It is difficult to come to consensus, however, when the only rule one can discuss is whether or not “Scripture says so.” Many members in the Churches of Christ, including the Conejo Valley congregation, still hold to the pattern of a cappella singing in worship but see it as a valued tradition and not necessarily as a point of theology.

The Undue Elevation of All Biblical Commands

The traditional hermeneutic and patternism also lead to a flat view of Scripture. If the Bible is only a blueprint or a book of facts, then texts that carry deep theological meaning have no greater weight of importance than texts that simply describe details. More importantly, texts that offer direct commands carry the greatest importance. Other texts, which might actually be more theologically significant but do not give clear

¹² Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 272.

directive commands, are interpreted automatically in line with clear commands or simply not seen as important at all.

One example of this is in how those who are conservative in the Churches of Christ define the role women can play in the worship assembly. Paul seems to state a clear command in 1 Timothy 2:12: he does not allow a woman to teach or have authority over a man. In seeming contradiction to this, he also says in Galatians 3:28 that “there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV).¹³ In addition to this, in Romans 16 Paul names three women as partners in ministry. Phoebe is called a “deacon” (Romans 16:1). That is possibly a servant or perhaps a leader in the church alongside elders, as described in 1 Timothy 3:8, 12. Prisca, or Priscilla, and her husband are described as “co-workers in Christ” (Romans 16:3). This implies that she was an equal partner in the work of ministry and likely a solid teacher of the Gospel. Junia is listed with her husband, Andronicus, as one who was “outstanding among the apostles” (Romans 16:7).

Under the traditional hermeneutic, the command from 1 Timothy would outweigh the other two passages. Galatians 3 would necessarily have to be in subordination to 1 Timothy 2, because the direct command of 1 Timothy 2 is more emphatic. Therefore, most conservative scholars and church members in the Churches of Christ say that Galatians 3 is describing the fact that all people are eligible to be saved—nothing more. Romans 16 would have to be described as saying something less than these women were partners in ministry—perhaps just a support to their husbands. In confronting traditional

¹³ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989).

hermeneutic and patternism, the Conejo Valley Church of Christ had to discern its theology on this very issue. After a period of study and prayer, which lasted almost ten years, the elders and ministry leaders came into agreement that the principles stated in Galatians 3 and Romans 16 are a broader, universal understanding of ministry in which both men and women use their gifts in the Christian Church; the direct command of 1 Timothy 2 is a situational exception Paul gives to Timothy for that specific context, which does not imply a universal principle.

There is more to be said regarding these passages as well as other examples of the limitations of this hermeneutic. However, further discussion is beyond the scope of this doctoral project. The examples mentioned above are offered merely as typical and common among conservative Churches of Christ.

The important thing with respect to this discussion is that even though this hermeneutic has severe limitations, it does powerfully illustrate the Churches of Christ tradition of taking Scripture seriously. The misinterpretations and stringent barriers ensuing from strict patternism may be misguided, but they stem from a deep desire to honor Christ by upholding Scripture. This high view of the importance of Scripture is at the heart of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ and informs this doctoral project.

The Rediscovery of Grace

In the 1960s, prominent Churches of Christ scholars and leaders began to challenge the hermeneutic and patternism. Many teachers, preachers, and professors began to rethink how they interpreted Scripture, particularly in terms of salvation by grace. The rationalistic, legalistic idea of getting everything right gave way to a wave of

realization that salvation was not the result of right understanding but of relationship with God.

Hughes was a student at Harding College in Arkansas at that time. In *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, he recalls the teaching of Jimmy Allen in a course on the Book of Romans. He describes the impact J. Allen's teaching had on students in that class with these words: "Their teacher explained that Christians are forgiven and redeemed solely through the grace of God, in spite of their sins and failure, not because of their goodness or merit. . . . Most of them had heard grace defined in terms of God's response to human effort, not as unmerited favor. That night a virtual revival broke out in the dormitories at Harding College."¹⁴

By the mid-1960s this deeper understanding of the Gospel of grace was causing many in the Churches of Christ to challenge the traditional hermeneutic. Thomas H. Olbricht was one such influential leader and scholar. In 1965 he wrote:

In my opinion Campbell got us headed in the wrong direction. . . . I think he was wrong in seeing the Bible as a set of facts, the unity of which emerges from the facts themselves. What he should have done is to raise the question of what are the great themes of the scriptures of God's love shown in his deeds of sin and salvation and then interpreted the individual facts in that light.¹⁵

Olbricht was describing a view of Scripture which placed relationship with God above the legalistic interpretations. A renewed understanding of the grace and love of God challenged the legalism of strict patternism. The idea that the Bible was a blueprint or a book of facts was being challenged by the idea that God is in pursuit of relationships with people and does not just look for His followers to adhere to a set of rules or precepts.

¹⁴ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 363-364.

¹⁵ Thomas H. Olbricht, "The Bible as Revelation," *Restoration Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1965): 229.

By the 1980s, Churches of Christ faced a hermeneutical crisis.¹⁶ The words of Russ Dudrey, a professor and scholar, echoed the sentiment of many: “As a Christian and a restorationist, I know that in the final analysis what is at stake in our hermeneutic is not merely the success of Restorationism: at stake is our knowledge of the Father. Hardline patternism approaches Scripture as a revelation of propositional truths rather than of the heart of the Father.”¹⁷ Seeing the Bible as a book of facts and rules to follow lends itself to narrow legalism. Many adherents in the Churches of Christ now have shifted to see Scripture more as a revelation of God’s desire for relationship with humankind.¹⁸

This view opens up a greater understanding of the importance and influence God wants to grant believers as they live in the world, under His rule (Matthew 6:33). The great doctrines of Scripture—such as grace (Romans 5:6-11; Ephesians 2:8), love (John 3:16; 1 John 4:7-8), and the call to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8)—become the guiding principles for biblical interpretation. Commands, examples, and necessary inferences are still present and considered; but they are interpreted carefully and critically through these greater themes, which reveal the heart of God.

Patternism can still be a powerful principle. There are patterns in Scripture which can benefit spiritual formation and identity development for believers. Specifically, patterns of behavior and action in the lives of men and women in the Bible can help guide and inform the practice of believers today. This doctoral project seeks to redefine

¹⁶ Ibid., 114.

¹⁷ Russ Dudrey, “Restorationist Hermeneutic among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?” *Restoration Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1988): 37.

¹⁸ Some examples are Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 365; D. Foster, *Will the Cycle be Unbroken*, 99-130; Shelly and Harris *The Second Incarnation*, 65-78.

patternism, in terms of the greater themes in Scripture within the life stories of biblical characters, which reflect the heart of God.

As life stories in the Bible unfold, they reveal the wisdom of following and trusting God. These stories illustrate how the daily choices of men and women in the Bible reflect their acceptance or rejection of God's rule. In this sense, their behavior reflects their belief about the present and coming Kingdom of God. This is a concept that traditionally has not been a central tenet of teaching in the Churches of Christ. The works of Willard and Wright are strong voices from outside the Churches of Christ heritage that help inform the theology of this doctoral project.

An Evangelical Stream: The Present Kingdom of God

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard contends that the Kingdom of God always has been present. Jesus brought it closer and made it available to believers through His earthly ministry and obedient sacrifice on the cross. Willard writes: "Now God's own 'kingdom' or 'rule' is the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done. The person of God and the action of his will are the organizing principles of his kingdom, but everything that obeys those principles, whether by nature or by choice, is in his kingdom."¹⁹ By this definition, the Kingdom of God is present in the world now, although not fully realized. Believers are empowered, by their submission to God and through the work of the Holy Spirit, to participate in the divine Kingdom of heaven here and now.

¹⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), 27.

This truth is evidenced in the work and teaching of Jesus. He prayed for God's will to be done and for His Kingdom to come on earth as in heaven (Matthew 6:10). According to Willard, this prayer was not that God would bring His Kingdom into existence, because it already existed; God was already ruling, by His very nature. Rather, Jesus prayed that God would bring it to bear and rule in the lives of people on earth just as it currently was in heaven.²⁰ From this perspective, Willard challenges believers to be a part of making that divine prayer come to fruition and bringing the Kingdom of God to bear in their lives today.

This way of viewing the Christian life, as participation in the present Kingdom of God, leads the believer to see that this truth is foremost an inner reality. Willard goes on to say, "The reality of the kingdom life is an inner one, a hidden one, with 'the Father in secret'. . . . So the kingdom of the heavens, from the practical point of view in which we all must live, is simply our experience of Jesus' continual interaction with us in history and throughout the days, hours, and moments of our earthly existence."²¹ Life in the Kingdom of God today is a life lived in faith by the power of the Spirit in relationship with God (Acts 1:8; 2:38-39) and is made possible by the saving work and example of Jesus.

In *How God Became King* Wright argues much the same position. He says that the point of the Gospels is to tell the story of how, through Jesus, the God of Israel

²⁰ Ibid., 259-260.

²¹ Ibid., 279-280.

became king of the whole world.²² He contends that the reign of God is present today. It was made known and brought to earth through the work of Jesus. It is, however, “an *inaugurated eschatological* message, claiming that this ‘something’ happened in and through Jesus and does not yet look like what people might have imagined.”²³ By this, he means that the Kingdom of God has come to bear upon the world through Jesus and through those who live under the influence of the Spirit today. However, it has not yet reached its full influence nor placed all other governments or authorities under its rule in obvious ways.

In Jesus, God fulfilled His long-awaited promises; yet, it did not come in the ways that many in the ancient world expected. Wright points out that this fulfillment comes first to the Israelites and through them to the rest of the world, as God always had intended. Israel’s long pattern of disobedience delayed the fulfillment of God’s promises for hundreds of years. Wright comments:

The pattern—God intending to live among his people, being unable to do so because of their rebellion, but coming back in grace to do so at last—is, in a measure, the story of the whole Old Testament. Magnify that exodus story, project it onto the screen of hundreds of years of history, and you have the larger story. Solomon builds the Temple, succeeding generations either corrupt it or try to reform it, but eventually faced with overwhelming rebellion and idolatry, God abandons the Temple at last, leaving it to its fate when the Babylonians close in . . . the whole of what we call the second temple period is characterized by this sense of divine absence: God is gone, and hasn’t come back.²⁴

²² N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012), 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

In the Gospels, God is now returning through the work of Jesus. The story the Gospels tell is the continuation of the story of the Old Testament. In Jesus, God is proclaiming anew that He is King. From the beginning of the world in Genesis to the final judgment in Revelation, the story of the Bible is that God is King. He created people to live in relationship with Him, under His benevolent rule for their own good and for His pleasure.

Through the fall and to the tower of Babel, it is clear that humankind is bent toward rebellion (Genesis 3-11). Through the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15), God builds a nation in Israel who will see His mighty deeds, believe in Him, and show the blessings of living under His rule to the entire world. The Israelites, blinded by their desire to follow the kingdoms around them, reject God, seeking a human king for their own glory (1 Samuel 8). The story of the rise and fall of Israel, through the time of the Judges and of the Kings, down through the prophets and into exile, is the story of Israel longing for God to set things right. However, the Israelites never fully placed themselves under God's rule.

While this is true of the nation of Israel as a whole, there are examples of men and women throughout the Old Testament who do live under the rule of God and reap blessings as a result. Moses stands at the burning bush, reluctantly trying to talk God out of sending him back to Egypt (Exodus 3-4). He eventually obeys God's call, and Israel is delivered from Egypt. Esther faces persecution and chooses to put herself in harm's way, trusting that God will protect her (Esther 4-6). In the end, she sees God come through with great deliverance because of her faithfulness. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego face what seems like certain death yet refuse to place the king above God (Daniel 3).

Their faith leads to a miraculous deliverance, showing that God is powerful and sovereign. These are just a few examples of those who chose to trust God and place themselves under the rule of His will. In the midst of the nation of Israel failing to live up to God's vision for them, these faithful people show how living faithfully under God's rule brings blessing and life, even through difficult times of trial.

The most amazing aspect of the story of Scripture is that God is gracious enough to allow Israel, and men and women today, to decide for themselves whether to follow Him. He is King. He is sovereign with the right and ability to destroy life or perhaps rule by force, but that is not His will.

In Jesus, this theme of God calling humankind into relationship with Him, under His rule, is given flesh and blood. Jesus arrives announcing, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). He lives life performing miracles (Matthew 4:23-25; Mark 1:21-34) that hark back to the message of the prophet Isaiah: the lame walk (Isaiah 35:6; cf. Luke 7:22), the blind see (Isaiah 29:18; cf. Matthew 11:5), and the deaf hear (Isaiah 35:5; cf. Matthew 11:5). In essence, the Kingdom of God has come.

Jesus teaches about how to live life under the rule of the Father (Matthew 5-7; Luke 13:18-30). He models for His disciples what a life of love and submission to God looks like. In His final act of submission and obedience, He dies on the cross (Luke 23:13-56). His resurrection proves that He has conquered all, even death (Romans 5:12-21). Now, through Jesus, God brings His Kingdom to everyone who will choose to follow and obey (John 1:10-12). God still reigns, as He always has, but now the doors of His Kingdom open to everyone.

God calls people from every tribe and nation to take their part in the grand story He has been telling from the beginning. He calls people to be faithful and accept His rule just as He always has throughout history, as recorded in the Bible. Just like Moses and Esther in the Old Testament, God calls on Mary (Luke 1:26-38), Peter (Matthew 4:18-20; John 20:15-19), and Paul (Acts 9), to take their place in the story. God's cry through Jesus and through the Christian Church is the same as it has ever been. Just as God carried and blessed faithful people like Moses, Esther, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, He offers his benevolent rule to all who choose him today. He loves creation. He loves people. He longs to bless them. If they will place themselves under His rule, they can become everything He envisions them to be.

The Best of Both Streams

Two powerful themes from these two streams of religious thought guide this doctoral project. From the American Restoration Movement, patternism can be a solid guiding principle for Christian practice. From the works of Willard and Wright, participation in the ever-present Kingdom of God provides a strong impetus for Christian self-understanding and purpose.

Left unchecked, patternism can become legalistic and lead to a skewed understanding of Scripture. However, this project offers a new definition for the restorationist principle of patternism. Rather than seeing patternism as a list of rules to follow, this view sees patterns of behavior and faithfulness in the life stories of biblical characters as templates and characteristics for believers to emulate to enhance their

relationship with God. Patternism in this view functions more in the sense of modeling life patterns rather than specific imitation of details.

Willard and Wright clarify that there is more to an obedient life and relationship with God than just simple behaviors. Choosing to trust God and act according to His will are profound steps in bringing the Kingdom of God to fruition in the world. Through Jesus, God opened the Kingdom of heaven to all those who believe. Through studying the life stories of biblical characters, believers can see tangible examples of how God can bring His Kingdom and His priorities into the world through them, just as He did with faithful characters in the Bible.

CHAPTER 5

THEOLOGY OF IDENTITY FORMATION USING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

In a book provocatively titled *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, neurologist Oliver Sacks tells the story of “Jimmie,” a man who has lost his short-term memory.¹ Jimmie is forty-nine years old but thinks he is only nineteen. Sacks meets him in 1975, but Jimmie believes the year is 1945. Jimmie can recall vivid details of his early life and speaks of the present as if it were thirty years earlier. He has no recollection of the past thirty years or even conversations that happened in the last two minutes.

Concerning Jimmie, Sacks writes that he is “isolated in a moment of being, with a moat of lacuna or forgetting all-around him. . . . He is a man without a past or a future, stuck in a constantly changing, meaningless moment.”² Without memory as a reference point, Jimmie is lost and does not even realize it. He is confused and disturbed when he sees himself in the mirror, older and graying. Without accurate memory, he cannot correctly define his world or even himself.

¹ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat: And Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Touchstone, 1985), 23.

² Ibid., 28.

In a sense, as a movement the Churches of Christ in the first half of the twentieth century is like Jimmie. C. Leonard Allen and Hughes make this point in *Discovering Our Roots*. They reference the case of Jimmie, as told by Sacks, and write: “The same is true of Christian identity. Without a memory of our origins and beginnings, of the perils and trials along the way, and of the people who have shaped our faith, we, like Jimmie, will find ourselves wandering aimlessly, unsure of who we are or where we hope to go.”³ David C. Steinmetz echoes this sentiment: “A church which has lost its memory of the past can only wander about aimlessly in the present and despair of its future. Having lost its identity, it will lose its mission and its hope as well.”⁴ For too long, the Churches of Christ believed that they were not shaped by the heritage of their past. They simply believed that they were the first-century Church restored, perfect and ordained by God. They were unable to critique or change any traditions because they denied that they had any influence outside of Scripture.

Over the last thirty years, many in Churches of Christ have begun to study and celebrate their heritage. They recognize how they have been shaped by the restorationist principles of key figures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They also recognize influences from the larger history and movements of the Protestant Church. This healthy practice informs self-understanding and clarifies a congregation’s identity within its community.

³ C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988), 2.

⁴ David C. Steinmetz, “The Necessity of the Past” *Theology Today* 33, no. 2 (July 1976): 168.

This same practice of corporate memory is clearly evidenced in the biblical text. Ancient Israel shared stories of faith and religious identity with new generations through Psalms, celebrations, and rituals. This chapter traces how these shared stories have shaped the identity of ancient Israel and the Christian Church.

How Story Shaped the Identity and Practice of Ancient Israel

In Scripture, memory plays a powerful role in the identity and practice of ancient Israel. Multiple times in the Old Testament, Israel is commanded to remember what God has done in the past (Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 4:1-14; 5:1-32; Joshua: 24). Feasts and festivals filled the annual calendar both to commemorate God's mighty acts in their history and as days of spiritual reflection and dedication (Exodus 12:11; 14-17; 16; Numbers 10:10; Leviticus 16 and 23). These commemorations helped ground present and future generations in their identity as the people of God.

Through retelling their stories during these events, the ancient Israelites solidified their connection to God and passed on their faith. Contemporary Jews carry on this tradition, still celebrating many of these same festivals in the synagogue today. To trace all of the stories and rituals of ancient Israel would be beyond the scope of this project. For specific purposes here, however, attention will be given to the story of the exodus from Egypt as the seminal event in Israel's identity as the people of God.

In Exodus 12:2, the month in which Passover happens is deemed the first month of the Israelite calendar. This is significant because it symbolizes not only that their year begins with the Passover month but that the nation of Israel as the freed people of God

also begins at Passover.⁵ The memory of the Passover, and the events that follow, make the great story of the exodus the event that defines God as deliverer and Israel as His chosen people. In essence, Israel's identity is tied to this story.

Walter Brueggemann writes that the memory of the exodus event "saturates the imagination of Israel."⁶ The exodus story applies to all of the circumstances that ancient Israel faces. In times of joy and celebration, it serves to remind them that they are free and blessed due to what God has done in the exodus. In times of personal or national distress and persecution, it serves to remind them to come back to God or call on Him to come save them again.

Gerhard Von Rad notes that in every age of Israel's history, they recall and recite the story of God's great deliverance from Egypt as a part of their foundational confession.⁷ He cites Deuteronomy 26:5-9 as Israel's greatest credo:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.⁸

Every portion of the Old Testament refers back to the exodus story at points. The examples that follow are far from exhaustive. Nevertheless, these serve to illustrate the power of this story in shaping the identity of the nation of Israel.

⁵ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 202.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 176.

⁷ Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2005), 175-176.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

Psalms of Remembrance

The Psalms are the liturgical psalter for the ancient Hebrews. Unlike the giving of the Law at Sinai, or the word of the Lord coming through the prophets, the Psalms are not direct revelation coming from God to humankind. They are instead a human creation. They offer Israel's response to their circumstances and their relationship with God. They offer a glimpse into the theology of the ancient Israelites in their own words.⁹ The Psalms are prayers, songs, and poems in which the people of Israel express their understanding of God and their need for God. By preserving the Psalms, Israel shares this theology, teaching present and future generations about God and human relationship with Him.¹⁰

The theme of the exodus is scattered throughout the collection. These songs and poems cover a broad range of human experience. In several Psalms, the exodus serves as a paradigm for describing how the author believes God should act and how His people should respond (cf. Psalms 78, 82, 106, and 135). Other Psalms are songs of lament. In these, the exodus motif is the basis for a cry to God for help, remembering the deliverance He brought in the past (cf. Psalms 44, 77, 83, and 143). There are also Psalms of praise, celebrating what God has done in the exodus (cf. Psalms 34, 100, 107, and 136). These declare that God cares about their deliverance. They remind Israel how blessed they are to be His chosen people.

⁹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

Exodus: The Beginning of Psalmody¹¹

Exodus 15:1-8 recounts the oldest expression of psalmody in ancient Israel.¹² As it exists in the text of Exodus, it is likely a compilation of more than one song.¹³ It tells the story of God delivering Israel from the army of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. The earliest text contained here may have originated very close to the actual event itself.¹⁴

The exodus is the beginning of the nation of Israel as the people of God. This song is also the beginning of Israel's psalmody.¹⁵ This suggests that from the beginning of Israel, as a delivered nation, they used the Psalms to declare what God has done. Exodus 15:1-8 serves as a very early example of Israel's witness to the world around them and to future generations. It shows both God's greatness and Israel's election as His people.¹⁶

Exodus as Paradigm

The escape from Egypt is such a profound story of deliverance to the people of Israel that it becomes a pattern often referred to in the Psalms. Sometimes it is referenced in short phrases that conjure up the image of exodus and God's mighty hand. Psalm 80:7-9 is one example: "Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be

¹¹ There are far too many examples of the exodus in Psalms to recount them all here. What follows are just examples from each type.

¹² Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 25; see also Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 140.

¹³ Durham, *Exodus* 203.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209-210.

¹⁵ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 25.

¹⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 163.

saved. You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.” The image of God plucking Israel from Egypt and planting His people in the Promised Land is an oft-repeated metaphor in the Old Testament.¹⁷ In Psalm 80, it brings to mind the exodus, reminding Israel of God’s goodness and pleading with God to act on their behalf once again.¹⁸

Other Psalms recount the exodus story extensively (cf. Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136). In these cases, the entire text is a lesson for its contemporary audience and future generations on how God’s mighty actions of the past can motivate His people to live in the present. These Psalms offer excellent examples of how Israel saw the exodus as a paradigm, both for their behavior and the expected actions of God on Israel’s behalf.

Psalm 78 is an example of this type. Here, the author calls for his audience to heed his teaching. “My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. . . . we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. . . . Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds” (Psalm 78: 1, 5, 7). He declares that the things he says should be taught and passed down through generations so that they will not be forgotten. He encourages the people to teach their children and put their trust in God, unlike the generations before them who saw God’s mighty acts and yet were not faithful.¹⁹ He recounts not only the plagues done by God in Egypt but the crossing of the

¹⁷ A. A. Anderson, *Psalms 73-150*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 594.

¹⁸ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books 1990), 314-315.

¹⁹ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: The Old Testament Library*, trans. H. Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 540.

Red Sea and the wilderness wanderings. He shares other moments from Israel's history all the way to David (Psalm 78:9-72).

Psalm 78 is clear instruction, meant to be shared and remembered. Its main message is that God is mighty and faithful, even when His people are not. The psalmist calls on later generations to be more faithful than their ancestors and grateful for God's power and loving kindness. The broad narrative of the exodus is a central story from Israel's history which shapes their identity and God's connection to them as His people.²⁰

Exodus in Psalms of Lament

Psalms of lament most often cry for deliverance (cf. Psalms 44, 77, 83, and 143). They come from people who feel oppressed or abandoned. Here the exodus motif is an antithesis of the author's current experience.²¹ While feeling lost, or suffering great pain, the psalmist remembers God's mighty acts of old. In despair, he either calls to God for deliverance or complains in disbelief and confusion over God's lack of action on his behalf.

In particular, Psalm 44 is a cry written in a time of national suffering. The first eight verses of Psalm 44 recount God's great acts of deliverance of ancestors. The rest is a complaint that God has allowed enemies to beat them down. The psalmist confesses faith in God and yet confusion over the fact that God is not acting on their behalf as He

²⁰ Ibid., 541.

²¹ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 215.

has done in the past. Peter C. Craigie notes that this author is similar to Job, in that he feels innocent and yet suffers without God's deliverance.²²

Psalm 77 offers an interesting case for the use of the exodus memory in lament. The psalmist begins by decrying the fact that he feels abandoned by God. Psalm 77:1-11 is a clear cry that God has not heard the prayers the author has offered in suffering. He then makes an interesting turn. The second half, Psalm 77:12-21, is a hymn of praise. In both halves of Psalm 77, the memory of God's acts of deliverance in the past drives the psalmist. In the first half, he bemoans the fact that God is not acting to deliver him in the present. In the second half, he voices the belief that God is mighty and will not fail him.

Brueggemann argues that the latter half of Psalm 77 marks a change in focus and attitude for the author.²³ The focus shifts from himself to God. The change in attitude marks the belief that his unresolved problems and present trouble are set in the context of hopeful trust in deliverance. This shift sets forth a hope that God's intervention is inevitable. His mighty acts in creation and deliverance at the hands of Moses and Aaron (Psalm 77:5, 6, 10-15, 19-20) are proof that God will not abandon His people.

Marvin E. Tate affirms that most commentators read Psalm 77 in agreement with the view expressed by Brueggemann. However, he offers a different possibility. He sees a sense of deep despair for this psalmist. In this view, the turn in Psalm 77:12-21 is not so much to confess hope but to lament that God is not acting today as He did in their past. Tate writes: "The recall of God's power and greatness in vv. 12-21 does not bring an

²² Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 335.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 137-140.

immediate end to doubt and waiting. The psalm seems to suggest that God moves on his own schedule and often the faithful must endure the anguish of waiting.”²⁴ Whether Brueggemann or Tate present the more accurate interpretation, the exodus story is still at the heart of this lament for the psalmist.

The power of the exodus story is in the background of the Psalms of lament. The pain and suffering the authors experience is the opposite of the ultimate deliverance the exodus story promises. Nevertheless, it is a strong testimony to the power of this story that the Psalms of lament recount the exodus either to recall God’s deliverance or to encourage God to come to the aid of His people again.

Exodus in Psalms of Thanksgiving

Many Psalms that reference the exodus story are Psalms of thanksgiving or celebration (cf. Psalms 34, 100, 107, and 136). These are rife with commands to praise God and remember His mighty acts (Psalm 34:3, 8-9, 17-18; Psalm 100:1-3; Psalm 107:2-3, 8-9, 15-16, 21-22, 31, 32, 43). They remind the Israelites that God is their great deliverer and they are His people.

Psalm 136 is traditionally associated with Passover, where it was used in corporate worship. A priest, or group of priests, would have sung the first line of each couplet. The congregation then would have sung the recurring refrain, “His love/grace endures forever.”²⁵ In this way, Psalm 136 served as a tool for both corporate worship

²⁴ Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 278.

²⁵ A. Anderson, *Psalms 73-150*, 893; see also Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 229-230, and Weiser, *The Psalms*, 792.

and rehearsing Israel's corporate memory of how God acted on their behalf in their shared history.

Psalm 136 affirms God's power over creation and as Israel's deliverer. Artur Weiser describes how Psalm 136 likely functioned in the lives of those who sang it. He writes: "The members of the congregation know themselves to be upheld by the eternal grace as they listen to the cultic recital which represents God's rule in Nature and in history as well as in creation and redemption, and so come to experience God's grace as something that is present with them."²⁶ The exodus motif in the Psalms served to help the Israelites remember what God had done in their past. It grounded them in truths about who God is and who they were as His people. The exodus story serves throughout the rest of the Old Testament as well for that same purpose.

Joshua's Call to Remember the Lord

The Book of Joshua is about the conquest of Canaan. God leads the nation of Israel in this conquest, because they are His people. Both at the beginning and the end of the book, Joshua refers to the exodus story to remind them how God has acted on their behalf in the past (Joshua 3-4 and 23-24). The exodus, coupled with God's provision in the conquest of Canaan, serves to remind Israel who they are. Their identity as the people of God is defined by God's mighty acts in the exodus. However, the Book of Joshua also highlights the obligation Israel has to obey God in order to continue being blessed as His people (Joshua 1:7-8; 7:10-13; 24:14-26). While the exodus defines them, their obedience is how they live as the people of God.

²⁶ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 793.

In Joshua 3 and 4, the nation of Israel crosses over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. This happens after the forty years of wandering in the wilderness and the death of Moses. Joshua is appointed as the new leader of the nation, taking the place of Moses.

Crossing the Jordan serves as a powerful act of remembrance for this new generation of Israel. Echoing the crossing of the Red Sea, God commands Joshua to send the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant into the waters of the Jordan. The waters cease to flow, exposing dry ground so the people of Israel can cross over. Following God's instruction, Joshua has men gather twelve stones from the middle of the riverbed. They use these to erect an altar. Joshua then explains the significance of these events in Joshua 4:21-24:

He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their parents, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God."

Richard S. Hess points out that Joshua identifies two purposes for God's action in the crossing of the Jordan. First, it shows God's great power over all of creation. For Israel and the inhabitants of the Canaan, it is significant that God does this miracle as Israel enters the land He promised them. He is clearly God over this land. Second, it reminds Israel that they are God's people.²⁷

²⁷ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 116.

Another important reminder of this event highlights the importance of Israel's obedience. Those crossing the Jordan were painfully aware that the previous generation was not allowed to enter the Promised Land due to their disobedience. Joshua's speech reminds them that their identity as the people of God was wrapped up in their obedience to His commands. Regarding this, Trent C. Butler makes an astute observation:

The people of God must realize that God does not help them automatically. God helps them when they obey his commands, given through his leader. . . . Israel must remember her tradition and devise means to teach it to her children. . . . God did not do miracles of the proportion of the Exodus or the Jordan in every generation. Yet every generation could devise teachings and ritual situations in which Israel could experience anew what God had done for them. For the people who followed, sanctified, remembered, and taught, God would raise up leaders in the Mosaic tradition who would teach the people the things to do to be the people of God.²⁸

The content of this teaching encompassed the powerful acts of God in Israel's history—namely, the events surrounding the exodus. Again, it is evident that recounting their history aided their obedience and solidified their identity as the people of God.

The end of the Book of Joshua returns to this theme, as Joshua challenges the people of Israel just prior to his death. Joshua 23 recounts the details of God's covenant with Israel, while Joshua 24 shows this leader of Israel calling the people to choose whom they will serve. He recounts the history of God's actions on Israel's behalf. The exodus story is central to this account. He reminds the people that God made the first move toward them by calling their ancestors to turn from other gods and to serve Him (Joshua 24:2-4). God took them by His mighty hand, out of Egypt, and destroyed their enemies before them. Through all this, he shows that God already has done more on their

²⁸ Trent C. Butler, *Joshua*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Publishers, 1985), 52.

behalf than they could ever repay.²⁹ In his final call, he pleads with them to throw off the gods of their earliest ancestors and the gods of the nations around them to serve the only true God who has set them apart as His people (Joshua 24:23-25). Remembering what God has done and responding in obedience are crucial to the Israelites' identity as the people of God. It is by remembering what God has done in the past and remaining faithful to Him in the present and the future that the people of Israel were to be blessed and recognized as the people of God.

Passover as a Feast of Remembrance

In Leviticus 23, Moses commands Israel to celebrate eight festivals or holidays. These special religious rituals were set on certain days to offer thanks to God for His provision or to set aside time for rest and worship. The Passover meal was the first feast established for Israel as the newly liberated people of God.

Passover is unique among the feasts of ancient Israel, because it specifically commemorates an historical event.³⁰ The people of Israel celebrated the Passover meal and its various rituals on the night before their deliverance. There is another reason why Passover is unique. It is the only feast of Israel that was established prior to the event it celebrates.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 274.

³⁰ Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals: History and Observance* (New York: Schocken Books, 1938), 33-34.

³¹ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 137.

The liturgy of Passover and the story of the exodus are tied together so closely that one cannot be properly understood without the other.³² From the very beginning, the focus of the Passover ritual was remembering what God did in Egypt and passing on faith to future generations. A simple reading of the instructions in Exodus 12:24-27 makes this clear:

Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, “What does this ceremony mean to you?” then tell them, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.”

In establishing the Passover feast, God provided Israel with a tangible expression of his deliverance. The feast also served as a valuable, multi-sensory tool for teaching future generations about this seminal event in their history. He commanded them to celebrate it annually in order to remember and share this great act with future generations.

Hundreds of years later, the kings of Israel and Judah abandoned their covenant with God. When Josiah became king of Judah, worshipping other gods was commonplace (2 Kings 21:19-24). When the Book of the Law was discovered and read, King Josiah launched a massive reform. He called all the people of Judah together to hear a reading of the entire Book of the Law. In their presence, he re-established the covenant with God. The Passover was a central part of his reform. Its first observance under Josiah is described in 2 Kings 23:21-23:

The king gave this order to all the people: “Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant.” Neither in the days of the judges who led Israel nor in the days of the kings of Israel and the

³² Ibid.

kings of Judah had any such Passover been observed. But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was celebrated to the Lord in Jerusalem.

Hayyim Schauss notes that under Josiah's lead the Passover became the most important feast and the greatest national holiday celebrated by Israel.³³

Centuries later, under Roman rule in the first century AD, the Passover was still a central aspect of Jewish ritual. During this time, the Jews came under severe oppression from the Romans. Schauss describes the importance of the Passover in this period as it became tied to the hope for Messiah: "It was during this period that the Messianic hope flared up, and in the mind of the Jews the deliverance of the future became bound up with the first redemption in Jewish history: the deliverance for Egypt. . . . Jews began to believe that the Messiah would be a second Moses and would deliver the Jews the self-same eve of Pesach."³⁴ While that deliverance never came in the way they envisioned it, the observance of Passover remained a powerfully grounding experience for Jews.

Today observance of the Passover happens in very similar ways. The Haggadah, which contains the liturgy for the Passover, has not changed in its basic essence since the time of the second temple period in Jerusalem.³⁵ Celebrating Passover still stands as a strong tradition of sharing the exodus story and helps to ground future generations in the faith of ancient Israel.

³³ Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals*, 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

The Word of the Prophets

Through the Psalms, the Book of Joshua, and the Passover observance, the exodus story helps establish the identity of Israel as people of God. For the Old Testament prophets the exodus motif also serves to remind the Israelites who they are to be. However, the prophets seek to call an unfaithful Israel to turn back to God. In this context, the exodus motif shows God's continued love and faithfulness. Israel is revealed as a rebellious people who refuse the identity God longs for them to share.

The Minor Prophets

The message of the minor prophets is largely about how God has been faithful to the people of Israel and how they have not been faithful in return. Hosea, Amos, and Micah offer specific examples as they share their respective word from the Lord. In each case, the prophet uses the exodus story as the backdrop of how Israel became the people of God and how they have failed to respond to God's guidance and provision.

Hosea portrays God alternately as a loving father whose child is rebellious or as the faithful husband of an adulterous wife. In Hosea 11:1 God refers to Israel as the son He calls out of Egypt. This is a reminder of God's actions on Israel's behalf in the exodus. However, this child rebels against God, in essence rejecting his adoption as God's son. This is an allusion to Israel, through disobedience, rejecting their blessed position as God's people.³⁶ In Hosea 2:14-15, Israel is called an unfaithful wife whom God will lead once again into the wilderness where she will turn to Him as she did in days gone by: "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness,

³⁶ David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989), 185-186.

and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.” Hosea recalls the exodus as though it were the time that the wife first came to her husband and made the commitment to be faithful to him. God shows His love and great grace by offering to receive the Israelites again, if they will return to Him, just as a loving husband might receive an unfaithful but repentant wife.³⁷ In both of these metaphors, Hosea uses the exodus story as the primary event that illustrates God’s great love and faithfulness and Israel’s identity as His people.

Amos and Micah use the exodus motif in much the same way as Hosea. The difference is that instead of foreseeing a hopeful future where Israel turns back to God, these two passages only speak of God’s punishment. Amos 2:9-10 states the exodus story in a clear summary and follows it by saying that, in response, Israel was unfaithful. Micah describes the Lord building a case against Israel, as if taking them to court: “O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (Micah 6:3-4). The pleading tone of this question implies that God has been loving and gracious to Israel.³⁸ In return, Israel has been ungrateful and rebellious. Amos and Micah use the exodus story as a clear example of God’s love and His acceptance of Israel as His people. It defines Israel’s identity as the people of God and confirms God’s commitment to bless them. There are many other references to the exodus

³⁷ Ibid., 186.

³⁸ Ralph L. Smith, *Micah – Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 50-51.

story in the books of the minor prophets (cf. Hosea 13:3-9; Amos 3:1-3; Haggai 2:4-6; Zechariah 10:9-12). However, these serve as solid examples of how it was used to show that Israel had not lived up to the faithful identity God had in mind for them.

Major Prophets

Much like the works of the minor prophets, the larger prophetic books also make use of the exodus story as a motif for describing God's faithfulness and defining Israel as His people. Jeremiah and Isaiah both make use of the exodus story as a metaphor for the redemption of Israel. Each of these prophets looks forward to a day when rebellious Israel will be brought back to God. This redemption is defined through the lens of the story of the exodus.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah find hope for the remnant of Israel through the lens of the story of exodus. For Jeremiah, those who survive the coming judgment will be blessed by God's mighty acts in a second exodus. Jeremiah 16:14-15 states this clearly and succinctly:

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, "As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt," but "As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them." For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers.

The prophet picks up this theme of deliverance again in Jeremiah 31. God will rescue His people again and establish a new covenant with them:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on

their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

In essence, the exodus story is the background on which Jeremiah bases his understanding of the new covenant and restoration of the remnant of God.³⁹

Isaiah also prophesies deliverance for the people of God through a second exodus.⁴⁰ Isaiah 49:8-14 describes it:

Thus says the Lord: "In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene." Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.

This is just one passage in Isaiah that brings out the theme of the exodus as a vision for the restoration of Israel. Bernard W. Anderson offers a detailed outline of how Isaiah 40 through 55 function as an extended exposition of the second exodus for the people of God.⁴¹

³⁹ Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 134.

⁴⁰ Bernard W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenberg*, eds. Bernard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 181.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 181-185.

How Story Shaped the Identity and Practice of the Early Church

The examples given above from the Old Testament illustrate how story functioned in ancient Israel to shape the identity of the people of God. This same principle is true for the burgeoning Christian Church in the New Testament. This section offers examples of how story shaped Christian identity in the early Body of Christ.

There are numerous examples of stories told in the text of the New Testament. One could argue that all of these stories were formational for the identity of the early Church. A thorough study of Jesus' parables alone would be well beyond the scope of this project—let alone, all the stories contained in the New Testament.

Rather, the purpose here is to show how story can be used to aid adolescent spiritual and identity formation. Toward that end, this section addresses three examples of story shaping the identity of believers in the early Church. The first is how Jesus, as Messiah, fulfilled the expectation of Israel and opened the Kingdom of God. The second story, closely related to the first, is how Jesus transformed the Passover and replaced the story of the exodus with the story of His death, burial, and resurrection as the seminal event defining Christian identity. The third is how the author of Hebrews uses the life stories of people from Israel's history to encourage his audience to remain faithful.

The Kingdom of God Fulfilled through Jesus

There is a direct connection between the story of Israel in the Old Testament and the story of Jesus and the Christian Church in the New Testament. At the close of the Old Testament, the story of Israel seems unfinished. They had not yet seen God fulfill His Kingdom through the Messiah, but Israel had not given up. As noted above, Schauss

reports that the time of Jesus was a period of great anticipation for Jews in Palestine. They expectantly looked for God to bring about another exodus type of event at the hand of the Messiah. They expected this deliverance to begin on the eve of Passover just as it had begun in Israel's earliest days.⁴²

The narrative of the New Testament is the story of how God fulfilled His purposes through Jesus. He was the Messiah who came to save on Passover eve. He gave Himself as a sacrifice and offered true deliverance to all people.⁴³ The New Testament writers saw that the key events of Jesus' life were not just isolated events that echoed the distant words of prophets. They recognized that through Jesus, God was bringing the story of Israel—in fact, the story of the world—to its intended conclusion.

The Gospel writers make extensive use of Old Testament quotations and allusions to show that Jesus fulfills God's intended plan for His coming Kingdom. Some examples are Matthew 1:81-23, Mark 1:1-3, Luke 24:25-27, and John 1:9-14. The opening scenes of each of the Gospels make the connection between Jesus and the history of Israel unmistakably clear. Their point is that through Jesus, the long story of Israel and the world "reaches its God-ordained climax."⁴⁴

The Gospel of John harks directly back to Genesis and Exodus in its prologue.⁴⁵ While there are no direct quotes from the Old Testament, allusions are so strong that they

⁴² Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals*, 48.

⁴³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 774.

⁴⁴ Wright, *How God Became King*, 67.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

would not be lost on the original audience.⁴⁶ In John 1:11 and 1:14, the author notes the irony that Jesus came to His own people, yet they did not recognize or receive Him as they should have. The rest of the Gospel explains this theme in detail.⁴⁷

The Gospel of Matthew begins with genealogy, drawing a direct line from Abraham to Jesus. The theme of Old Testament fulfillment through Jesus is common throughout this narrative. Matthew has more than twice as many explicit quotations from the Old Testament as the other Gospels.⁴⁸ In the Words of Luke T. Johnson, “Matthew brings specific texts of Torah and specific scenes of the Messiah’s life together, so that both are mutually interpretive.”⁴⁹

The Gospel of Mark begins with the clear claim that Jesus is both Messiah and the son of God (Mark 1:1). This Gospel alludes to several connections between Old Testament texts and their fulfillment in Jesus (cf. Mark 1:2-3; 4:12; 10:34; 14:62). However, it also seems clear that these connections were not readily recognizable to the disciples or the religious leaders around Jesus until late in His ministry.⁵⁰ Through this progression, Mark shows readers that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who fulfills God’s great story but it did not happen as anyone had expected.

⁴⁶ Luke T. Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 478-480, gives a concise yet detailed exposition of how the prologue to the Gospel of John both echoes Old Testament themes and anticipates many of the themes presented in the rest of the Gospel.

⁴⁷ Wright, *How God Became King*, 77-78.

⁴⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), liv.

⁴⁹ L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 188.

⁵⁰ The idea of the “Messianic Secret” in the Gospel of Mark has been discussed extensively by scholars. For a succinct and useful description, see R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 89-91.

The Gospel of Luke begins with the author's claim that he has researched and studied the story he is about to tell, giving credence to his account (Luke 1:1-4). He then recounts the angelic predictions of the birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 1:11-17, 26-38). The songs of Mary and Zechariah echo the great themes of deliverance (Luke 1:46-56, 67-80). Through these allusions, Luke establishes that God is moving to bring about the promise of His coming Kingdom and the true King.⁵¹ Luke also uses several other allusions to Old Testament themes and texts to clearly make the point that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's hopes (Luke 3:4-6; 4:18-19; 7:18-23; 19:28-44). Perhaps in the strongest reference of fulfillment, in Luke 24:13-35, after His resurrection, Jesus explains how from Moses forward all the Scriptures pointed to Him.

The message of the Gospels is how God fulfilled all His promises to Israel through Jesus the Messiah. Both the exodus and the Passover pointed forward to Jesus as the true "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). The exodus was celebrated for centuries in the Passover meal. Jesus transformed this meal into a remembrance of His death, burial, and resurrection (Matthew 26:26-27; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20). This will be discussed in more detail below. For now it is important to note that in the establishment of the Lord's Supper, the story of God's deliverance finally has been fulfilled to the point that all are eligible to take advantage of it through faith in Jesus. The story of Jesus shapes the identity of every believer just as the story of the exodus shaped the identity of ancient Israel.

⁵¹ Wright, *How God Became King*, 75-76.

The Book of Acts carries on this theme as the Church spreads across the ancient world. Luke opens this sequel to his Gospel with a post-resurrection conversation between Jesus and the disciples. In Acts 1:6 the disciples ask, “Is now the time you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Without answering their question directly, Jesus in a sense tells them “yes,” but it was not to be as they had expected.⁵² He tells them to stay in Jerusalem, until they receive power from the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses and He is taken up in a cloud before them (Acts 1:6-9). At Pentecost, this promise is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God comes in full force through a mighty wind, tongues of fire, and speaking in tongues (Acts 2:1-13). These witnesses of Christ are being transformed into messengers of the Kingdom by the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.⁵³ Peter proclaims that Jesus, who was crucified, has become both Lord and Christ. That day three thousand join this movement of God (Acts 2:14-41). The story of Jesus as Messiah is transforming the hearts and minds of those who believe.

Over the remainder of the Book of Acts, the disciples spread the news of the Kingdom. They meet with both great success and tremendous persecution. The chief persecutor himself, Saul of Tarsus, has a miraculous encounter with the risen Christ. He becomes the greatest advocate for the Christian Church and dedicates his life to spreading the good news about Jesus the Messiah. The Book of Acts ends with a solid affirmative answer to the question with which it began. In Acts 28:28-31 Paul proclaims the Kingdom of God and teaches about the Lord Jesus Christ with boldness. The clear

⁵² Ibid., 248.

⁵³ L. Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament*, 224.

implication is that through the Church, in the name of Jesus, the Kingdom of God has come. The transforming story of the Messiah continues to shape new believers.

The other writings of the New Testament also bear witness to the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God through Jesus. Peter speaks specifically to believers who are suffering persecution in his letter known as 1 Peter. He helps them to define their identity and find hope in 1 Peter 1:1-11. Quoting Isaiah 28:16 and Psalm 118:22, he reminds them that Jesus is the precious cornerstone laid in Zion, the stone the builders rejected. These are direct references to Jesus being God's anointed one. He then goes on to tell them that as committed followers of Jesus they are "a chosen people, Holy Nation, God's own people." This is even more dramatic, given the fact that his audience is likely Gentile believers. These terms, once reserved for Israel only, now apply to all who accept Jesus as Lord. The story of deliverance through the Messiah once was understood as only a hope for Israel. Now through Jesus all those who believe can be transformed into the holy people of God.

These are just a few examples of how the story of Jesus fulfilling the promises of the Kingdom of God shaped the identity of the early Church. There are many other examples throughout the New Testament (cf. Romans 8:18-38; Hebrews 4:14-16; Galatians 3:23-29; 1 John 3:1-3). The fulfillment of the Kingdom of God through Jesus as the ultimate deliverer is the foundational story for Christian identity.

Death, Burial, and Resurrection: The Passover Fulfilled

As noted above, the Passover was the central event of remembrance for ancient Israel. It reminded them of God's mighty acts on their behalf and their election as His

people. For this reason, it makes sense that Jesus would keep the Passover meal as a central event when He fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament and ushered in the Kingdom of God. Based on the Passover meal, the Lord's Supper is now the central event of remembrance for the Christian Church.

The synoptic Gospels reveal that on the night Jesus was betrayed, He shared the Passover meal with His disciples. In the midst of the meal, He took the unleavened bread and a cup of wine and repurposed them. From that point on, the disciples were to view the bread as the broken body of Jesus and the cup as His blood, shed on their behalf (Matthew 26:26-27; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20).

At the moment when Jesus instituted these emblems, the disciples certainly could not have fully understood what He meant or the depth of their significance.⁵⁴ Shortly afterward, they became painfully aware of what He meant. In a very short time, Jesus was arrested, crucified, and buried. The disciples must have heard His words ringing in their ears and puzzled over their significance. Just three days later, Jesus rose from the dead, changing everything (Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10). Over the days and weeks that followed, the Church was born. The disciples came to understand Jesus' intent as He redefined the significance of these elements of the Passover meal.

The Book of Acts records "breaking bread in houses" as part of the practice of the Church in Acts 2:42 and 2:46. This phrase clearly refers to the remembrance feast instituted by Jesus.⁵⁵ In Acts 20:7, there is a meeting in a home to "break bread" and hear Paul preach.

⁵⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 775.

⁵⁵ L. Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament*, 121.

The clearest clue to the formative power of the Lord's Supper story is found in 1 Corinthians 11. Here Paul deals with a group of early believers who seem to have forgotten the basic truths about Christian fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 11:21, he notes that when the Body of Christ gathers some are eating and drinking too much in the name of "the Lord's Supper" while others are going without. He chides them for their lack of concern for others and the "church of God." In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, he reminds them of the story they seem to have forgotten:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

He goes on to warn them that there are grave consequences for not honoring this sacred ritual properly. In 1 Corinthians 11:29, he says that those who do not "discern the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves."

This letter to the church in Corinth predates the Gospels. Therefore, this is the earliest record biblical readers have of any words of Jesus.⁵⁶ There is some debate among scholars as to what Paul meant exactly by the phrase, "I received from the Lord what I passed on to you." The debate stems from whether Paul received this directly from the Lord through special revelation or whether he means he received a tradition that dates back to the Lord.⁵⁷ The important matter for this study is that Paul uses this story

⁵⁶ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 157.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

specifically to shape the Christian practice and identity of those he teaches and mentors in Corinth.

Just as the Passover meal was a pivotal event in the worship and practice of ancient Israel, so is the proper keeping of the Lord's Supper for the Christian Church. It serves as a reminder of the flesh and blood sacrifice of Jesus on behalf of the world. It also serves as a reminder that the Body of Christ is integrally connected to the history of Israel. Jesus fulfills all the hopes of Israel and opens up the Kingdom of God through His obedience to the Father and sacrifice on the cross. He is the new Pascal Lamb, given for the nations. All who believe in Him are invited to play their part in the Kingdom and in the grand story God has been writing from the beginning. Faithful observance of the Lord's Supper tells this story succinctly, with rich symbolism, reminding Christians that through this sacrifice, they are the new Israel, the people of God.

Stories of Faith from Hebrews

The focus of this chapter has been the broad stories and that shaped the corporate identity of ancient Israel and the early Christian Church. In this last section, focus shifts to smaller stories that the author of the Book of Hebrews uses to encourage his audience to remain faithful. These life stories from people in the history of Israel also can serve as examples for believers today.

The author of Hebrews writes to a small group of Christians, likely a house church. William L. Lane notes that their numbers were probably not more than twenty.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ William L. Lane, "Hebrews," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, 443-458 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 445.

His further description of this community, based on evidence in the text, offers great insight into who these people were and why the author is writing to them.⁵⁹

The Letter to the Hebrews is not so much a letter as it is a homily, a sermon, or a word of exhortation.⁶⁰ The intended audience had seen persecution in the early days of their faith and stood firm, supporting one another through it (Hebrews 10:32-35). Now they have become lackadaisical in their faith (Hebrews 2:1-4; 5:11) and have seen some members leave (Hebrews 10:25). There is a strong likelihood of future persecution (Hebrews 10:36-39). The author writes this exhortation to encourage them to stand strong.

The main thrust of the first part of this exhortation is a reminder that in Jesus, God has fulfilled His covenant with the Israelites. Jesus is the last word from the Father, concluding the long line of God's revelation through their ancestors and prophets (Hebrews 1:1-2). In Him, the plan of salvation is completed, as God intended from the beginning (Hebrews 1:2-4). He is superior to the angels (Hebrews 1:6-14) and to Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6). Unlike the temple and the Aaronic priesthood, which were temporal, Jesus is the great and eternal high priest (Hebrews 2:17-3:1; 4:14-5:10; 7:1-25). The sacrifice Jesus made is also superior. Jesus' sacrifice was done once and will be effective for all time, unlike the sacrifices of the temple priests which had to be repeated (Hebrews 7:26-10:18).

Having reminded them of the security of their faith in Jesus, the author turns to men and women in their history as examples of persevering faith. Referencing these life

⁵⁹ Ibid., 445-447.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 450.

stories gives this small church multiple examples of faithful people with whom they can relate. This reminds them that they are not alone in their walk. They stand in a long line of the faithful whose stories are part of the grand story God has been writing throughout history (Hebrews 12:1; 13:7-8).⁶¹

The Faith of the Righteous

This catalogue of the faithful is shared in Hebrews 11. Thomas G. Long notes that they can be divided into four categories: those who were righteous, those who journeyed obediently in faith, those who were tested by suffering; and finally, a large group who shared all three of these characteristics.⁶² His analysis provides structure for discussing these life stories here.

Abel belongs in the collection of faithful people, because the Lord accepted his offering as righteous.⁶³ Due to this righteous offering, Cain murdered him in jealousy. In effect, Abel's righteousness led to his becoming the first martyr for being faithful to God. For this reason, Abel still speaks as an example to suffering Christians.

Enoch, it is said, "did not experience death" (Hebrews 11:5); he walked with God, and God took him away (Genesis 5:26). His example illustrates the eventual outcome for all who continue in faith—not that they will not face death but that they will certainly be pleasing to God. In the end, they will be with God.

⁶¹ L. Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament*, 418.

⁶² Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 115-124.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 116.

Noah shows his faith by righteous obedience. He is called to build the ark to avoid the oncoming flood (Genesis 6:9-22), which he could not envision or foresee except through the eyes of faith. His confidence and certainty inform the definition of faith, given in Hebrews 11:1 as the essence of things unseen.

The Faith of Those who Journey Obediently

By faith Abraham set out on a journey to a place he had never been. He trusted that God was faithful; therefore, he followed Him into the unknown (Genesis 12:1-4). This is also true of Sarah. God had promised her and her husband a great legacy of descendants, yet she was barren (Genesis 18:1-18). By God's provision, she and Abraham were enabled to have children, as promised (Genesis 21:1-7). Their descendants, Isaac and Jacob, also journeyed, awaiting the deliverance and inheritance God had promised.

The Hebrew writer says that they were able to endure, because they were “looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder was God” (Hebrews 11:10). He confirms that these people are counted among the faithful because they saw beyond their present situations:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

The implication for suffering Christians is clear. They should look to God's promised future and not give up hope.

The Faith of Those Tested by Suffering

The author of Hebrews again illustrates the meaning of faith by pointing out that those who endured suffering did so by trusting in things that were unseen. Abraham is an example of such faith because he trusted that, if necessary, God could raise Isaac from the dead to fulfill His promise (Hebrews 11:17-19). By faith, Joseph with the same kind of foresight spoke of the exodus from Egypt, which he would never live to see (Hebrews 11:22).

Moses also showed great faith, trusting in what he could not see. He rejected the comforts of the house of Pharaoh to live with the people of God and be mistreated. “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as greater than the treasure of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward” (Hebrews 11:12).

All of these people stand as examples to the readers. Whether they faced persecution, death, or an uncertain future, these ancient people of faith trusted that God was faithful to deliver them. The author of this letter makes his point clear. He encourages his readers to take courage from the stories of faithful people in their past. He urges them to stand firm in the midst of whatever struggle or suffering is to come, believing the inheritance is worth the cost.

The Great Collection of the Faithful

The author of Hebrews closes this section saying, “What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets” (Hebrews 11:32). He goes on to illustrate his point with

snippets from stories of people who suffered greatly yet remained faithful. All this leads to the climax of his point:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

This little church to whom the author writes does not stand alone. They may face uncertain days of trial or persecution; but as the author notes through this long list of faithful people, the people of God often have faced hardship. Even Jesus did not escape such persecution. His faithfulness through persecution brought Him great reward. These stories are intended to encourage Jesus' disciples to hold on, no matter what they may face. The point of this entire exhortation is that Jesus has overcome whatever forces stand against His followers. The life stories of the faithful throughout the history of Israel stand as examples for believers to follow so they will not lose heart. This same principle is true for believers today.

Present Participation in the Ongoing Story of God

This chapter opened with the illustration of a man who had lost his short-term memory. As a result, he lost the ability to understand himself and his world. This chapter argues that any church or even individual who loses touch with their personal or corporate history is in danger of sharing the same fate.

The way to avoid losing Christian identity is never to forget the stories on which that identity is based. Conversely, the best way to build Christian identity is to become

increasingly familiar with those stories, which contain the message and values of the Christian faith. The brief survey of Scripture presented here argues that the identity of ancient Israel and of the early Christian Church were shaped by the powerful stories they received from God.

These stories find their culmination in Jesus. He is the completion of all that God planned for the human race from the beginning of time. The story of the Christian Church is not a new story, set against the story of ancient Israel. It is the continuing story that God began with ancient Israel. Christians today stand in the long line of those who have been the people of God since the beginning of time.

The stated objective for this doctoral project is to help adolescents find their identity in this great story of God. The life stories of the faithful have been used for centuries to ground current generations of believers in faith. As shown in Chapters 1 and 2 of this discussion, adolescents at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ have lives filled with activities and responsibilities which leave them with little time or emotional energy for spiritual formation. This project proposes a short-term experience that can help them connect their life story with the life stories of biblical characters. The hope is that this will aid their desire to practice spiritual disciplines and build their identity as people of God. What follows in Part Three is the practical plan for accomplishing that goal.

PART THREE

MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER 6

GOALS AND PLANS

Describing the advent of the Kingdom of God and the ability to live the God-centered life now, Willard writes:

Jesus came among us to show and teach the life for which we were made. He came very gently, opened access to the governance of God with him, and set afoot a conspiracy of freedom in truth among human beings. Having overcome death he remains among us. By relying on his word and presence, we are enabled to reintegrate the little realm that makes up our life into the infinite rule of God. And that is the eternal kind of life. Caught up in his active rule, our deeds become an element in God's eternal history. They are what God and we do together, making us part of his life and him a part of ours.¹

The ultimate goal of this doctoral project is to help all parents, other adults, and teens that participate recognize God's desire for them to play a vital part in the story God has been writing from the beginning. This is what Willard calls "the eternal kind of life." He focuses on the importance of connection with Jesus as the source for spiritual life in God and as the most important model. While acknowledging this as true, this project also recognizes the value of other life stories in the biblical text. Imitation of Jesus is the highest goal of the Christian disciple. At the same time, many other life stories contained

¹ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 27.

in Scripture also can be formative for believers and point the way through struggles as disciples seek to imitate Christ.

Chapter 4 demonstrated that life stories of biblical characters offer patterns of action and behavior that can guide and inform believers today. Chapter 5 carried on this theme, showing that the shared stories of the people of God always have shaped their identity, both in ancient Israel and in the early Church. Hebrews 11 and 12 are a primary example of this principle. Now, Chapter 6 outlines the specific goals and strategies leading to their accomplishment.

Goals for Personal Spiritual Impact

There were three main findings demonstrated in Part One of this paper. The first is that American teenagers today are in danger of walking away from genuine Christian faith into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The second finding is that the greatest spiritual influence on teenagers is their parents, followed by the impact of other faithful adults. This is true whether these adults exhibit healthy spirituality or not. Finally, it was clearly demonstrated that many teens, including those at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ, are so deeply involved in school and extracurricular activities that specific time for personal reflection and spiritual formation often gets squeezed from their lives. The goals outlined below offer several processes as proposed solutions to these problems.

Goal #1: Teen and Adult Connection through Small Groups

Connection between teens and adults is crucial for adolescent identity development. Teens tend to adopt whatever spiritual practices and values they see modeled by the adults around them. If adults do not practice strong spiritual habits, teens are unlikely to see these

practices as important or useful. As Smith and Denton have said, when it comes to religious faith in adolescents, parents “get what they are.”²

This project envisions a future in the Conejo church where interested adults have a solid grasp on their connection to God and practice spiritual disciplines. As a result, they understand the importance of their influence on the next generation and long to be used by God in the lives of teenagers. These faithful parents and adults gladly will pass on their insight and faith to students through mentoring and shared experiences in close-knit small groups.

The biggest obstacle to healthy spiritual formation in Conejo church teens is the fact that almost all of them are over-programmed. This is evident from the research presented in Chapter 2 of this discussion. Close-knit small groups can be a wonderful and effective format for discipleship and spiritual growth.³ However, the greatest small group program and the most impactful spiritual disciplines remain ineffective, if the target audience is unable to participate. For this reason, this project is designed with a short-term commitment for a long-term impact.

Long-term commitments of a full three-month quarter or a ten-week series are very difficult for many of the families in the Conejo congregation to keep. This project is designed to require meeting once a week for just six weeks in a small group experience called “*Walking with God*.” It is designed to be repeated at different times of the year,

² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 261.

³ Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 11-12; Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 13-16.

making it available to a different group of students each time as their extracurricular and school calendars allow.

Adults experiencing *Walking with God* for the first time will need to make a longer time commitment. They will need to participate in a six-week training process and then commit for another six weeks to lead a group of students through the *Walking with God* experience. This should not be a major obstacle. There are almost thirty family units involved in the Conejo youth ministry. Only four to six adults need to commit to be small group leaders for each subsequent session with students. My twenty-one years of experience with families at the Conejo church leads me to believe this will not be an issue.

Goal #2: Adults Who Recognize the Importance of Their Influence

It is crucial that the adults who agree to be small group leaders understand the importance of their influence in the lives of teens. If they do not have a strong grasp of this, they may be tempted to be lax in their commitment to the group. This could lead to a lack of following through on spiritual disciplines or the failure to model the behaviors they need to help students learn and adopt. This would have a very adverse effect on the outcome of the *Walking with God* seminar in the lives of teens. For this reason, all parents and adults who volunteer to be group leaders will receive training in the importance of their influence in addition to the specific training to lead the *Walking with God* experience.

The first session of training for adults will include material from the National Study of Youth and Religion and the *Sticky Faith* initiative. Presenting information from these resources will help adults understand the importance of their influence. A summary

and explanation of the findings from these two-research projects will be presented to adults. They also will be made aware of *Soul Searching*, *Almost Christian*, and both volumes of *Sticky Faith* so they can obtain these resources for further reading if they are interested.⁴

Goal #3: Effective Adult Small Group Leaders

Positive connections and healthy relationships with faithful adults are important factors for adolescent spiritual development.⁵ The small groups in the *Walking with God* seminar are designed to facilitate these kinds of relationships. In order for this to be most effective, the adults who lead must be committed to the process and receive proper training to connect well with the teens they will lead. Adult leaders need to understand that their faith walk is an important model for students. As small group leaders they must take their own spiritual journey seriously first, so they can be effective group leaders and mentors for the students in their group.

All adults who commit to this process will experience the entire *Walking with God* seminar prior to leading a small group of high school students. Small group leader training also will be a component of this preliminary experience. This training will include instruction in leadership qualities and the dynamics of discipleship based on the work of Arnold.⁶

⁴ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*; Dean, *Almost Christian*; Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*; Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition* are each discussed in Chapter 1.

⁵ Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 106-107.

⁶ Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups* 17-24, 194-195.

In short, the *Walking with God* experience will be an exercise in discipleship. As the facilitator, I will guide the adult leaders through the experience. These adults then will serve as group guides for a small group of high school students as they go through the seminar. Finally, after having seen the material and program presented twice, the adults will be ready to lead a group through the *Walking with God* seminar on their own. This process will be outlined in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Goal #4: Personal Story and Biblical Mentors for Adults

There are two foundational purposes for the *Walking with God* experience. The first is for participants to see that their life story is a part of the grand story that God has been writing since the beginning of time. The second is for them to recognize that the life stories of biblical characters can inform their decisions and help them make sense of their own life experiences. The two tools that will help accomplish these goals make up the curriculum for *Walking with God* small groups. Adult leaders will experience these for themselves prior to leading teens.

The first tool is a prayer journal that I have developed specifically for this experience. It will guide participants through simple, daily spiritual practices and reflection. These practices do not require a great deal of time to complete. Participants will work through each exercise in just ten to fifteen minutes a day for five days of each week. They will not be cumbersome or time prohibitive for participants with busy schedules. They will help participants develop habits of spiritual discipline while reflecting on Scripture and the life story of a spiritual mentor of their choosing. The outline of this prayer journal is described in detail in a later section of this same chapter.

The second tool in the small group process is the “Post-it Note Timeline,” developed by Terry Walling, which will be modified for this project.⁷ This exercise helps people make a detailed outline of events from their life and reflect on how God has been involved with them from the beginning. The process, and how it has been modified specifically for connecting with adolescents, is outlined in detail in a later section of this same chapter.

Goal #5: Adults Discipling Teens

Adults discipling teens is the core activity in this process. Adults who understand the impact of reflecting on their own life story and the life story of their biblical mentor will be better equipped to guide teens in seeing the importance of these activities in their own lives. Through small group discussions and encouraging teens to practice spiritual disciplines, adult leaders will become effective mentors who disciple teens in Christian practice and reflection. All of this is accomplished through adult leaders experiencing and then modeling the activities of the *Walking with God* seminar.

Once adults have completed the *Walking with God* experience, they will lead a group of high school students through the same process. The entire project becomes an exercise in discipleship. The adults, having learned from spiritual disciplines and creating their personal timeline, pass these same practices on to teens as a means to aid them in

⁷ Terry Walling, *Perspective Time Line*, Focused Living Resource Kit (Saint Charles, IL: Churchsmart Resources, 1999), 15-17. I first encountered the Post-it Note Timeline as a participant in Terry Walling, “OD757: Organic Leadership Development” (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2010). The process has been modified slightly to meet the needs of this project with adolescents.

developing spiritual habits of reflection and meditation in order to learn lessons about themselves and their relationship with God.

Goal #6: Teens Connecting with the Story of God

The final goal for this project is for teens to find their identity and purpose in the grand story of God. Through significant interaction with adults during the *Walking with God* experience, they will have seen adults model Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer. Likewise, they will practice these same spiritual disciplines by working through a prayer journal.

The expected outcome will be to learn to view a Bible character of their choosing as a spiritual mentor for their life. Through the modified Post-it Note Timeline experience, they will reflect on how God has been involved in their life from the beginning and envision His plan for them in the future. In the end, it is hoped that teens who go through the *Walking with God* experience will be grounded in an authentic relationship with God, which has been strengthened by the experience and their connection with significant adults.

Leadership and Target Population

For the pilot run of *Walking with God*, adult participants will be chosen by the Youth Committee and personally invited to participate. The Youth Committee is a group of parents and interested adults who have committed to support the youth ministry of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. They meet monthly to pray for students and to plan, organize, and evaluate ministry initiatives and programs. They have a working

knowledge of families in the congregation and are equipped to choose adults who will be strong candidates for this project.

There is specific criteria to help ensure the effectiveness of adult leaders and the success of the small groups. First, leaders must be active members of the Conejo church. Second, they must exhibit a desire to live a faithful life. Parents of teens who meet the first two criteria may be invited to participate. Other adults who are not parents of teens also may be viable candidates to participate. Potential *Walking with God* leaders need not be currently involved as a volunteer with the youth ministry, but they must show an interest in the spiritual growth of teens and exhibit an affinity for them. In accordance with Conejo church policy, they must undergo and pass the same background check that is required for all adult volunteers who work with teens or children.

Participation for students will be open to high school juniors and seniors. The personal timeline process requires reflection on one's past and a desire to discern the voice of God concerning one's gifts and plans for the future. Such reflection requires a certain amount of life experience in order to be effective. This process also requires a level of critical thinking which may not be as readily present in very young teens.

In January 2001, I first encountered the Post-it Note Timeline while taking a course entitled "Organic Leadership Development" with Walling. In a class discussion, he advocated against participants younger than their early twenties going through this exercise. Walling argued that younger people do not have enough life experience or personal insight to interpret their life events effectively or gain from the personal

timeline.⁸ This is the reason the exercise has been modified for this project. Caring adults who understand the process will guide students to gain appropriate insights from their own life story.

Curriculum Overview

Walking with God will be a six-week experience of guided prayer and personal reflection. The group will meet for ninety minutes on Sunday afternoon for six consecutive weeks. A modified Post-it Note Timeline exercise will guide participants to reflect on their life story. The “*Walking with God Prayer Journal*” will guide daily reflection and spiritual disciplines for participants throughout the week, between meetings. Time commitment for these daily reflections will range from ten to fifteen minutes a day, five days a week.

Atmosphere for Learning

The environment for this experience is crucial to its success. For the participants, the atmosphere should feel more like a special seminar rather than a normal Sunday Bible class experience. Providing simple snacks and drinks will help make the experience better for everyone. Quiet music will be prepared for playing during times when participants are working on their timeline project.

The room will be arranged with enough tables and comfortable chairs to make participants feel relaxed and welcome. Participants will need enough room at their table for a piece of poster board 18 inches by 24 inches. Each table should seat no more than

⁸ Ibid.

four or five participants. Informal sharing or discussion around the tables is an important part of the process. Tables of four or five participants make the perfect group size for sharing and discussion.⁹

Weekly Overview

This section discusses the weekly experience with adults and students. Leadership training material and information about small group dynamics are part of the training for adult leaders. While this material is mentioned in the section above, entitled “Goal #3: Effective Small Group Leaders,” and is outlined more fully in Chapter 7, it is not reflected in this discussion. This portion describes the functioning of a large group seminar. It is done this way to illustrate how it might be led with several small groups together in one location. This calls for multiple tables with four to five people seated at each table. For effective interaction between adults and teens, this setup would have one adult group leader at each table. This adult would mentor the teens at his or her table throughout the process.

This format is designed for the pilot project of this program. It allows all adults who have gone through the initial experience and the leader training to experience the material a second time before taking on leadership for the experience on their own with a small group. This will be a valuable experience in discipleship. Adult leaders will mentor a small group of teens through the experience while having me, as an experienced group leader, model for them how to lead the entire large group experience.

⁹ Arnold, *Big Book on Small Groups*, 194-195.

This is not the only possible format for the *Walking with God* seminar. The hope is that adult leaders will begin to lead smaller groups on their own in different venues after going through the initial process. From the second year of *Walking with God* forward, it is designed for one or two adult leaders to lead a small group of three to five teens in a home or in another comfortable, informal setting. Once they are equipped, adult leaders also can lead this seminar with a small group of adults, increasing its effectiveness in the Conejo church at large.

Walking with God Seminar Outline

The following outline is a brief description of the *Walking with God* experience. For the Post-it Note Timeline, the first four sections are based on Walling's *Perspective Time Line*.¹⁰ The first four steps of this process follow Walling's outline. While this basic outline of steps comes from Walling, I have developed specific discussion questions to guide the process for this project. The addition of a fifth step modifies the exercise for use with adolescents, guided by adults. The outline below gives a brief description of each step. The full instructions and leadership notes for Steps One through Four are in the *Perspective Time Line*.¹¹ Instructions and leadership notes for Step Five are original to this project.

At the onset, each participant will receive the *Walking with God Prayer Journal*. The discussion below gives a brief description of the weekly content of this journal. The

¹⁰ Walling, *Perspective Time Line*, 15-18.

¹¹ Ibid.

journal will have readings and prayers for five days each week and activities connected with the weekly sessions.

Week One

The first session is an introduction to the Post-it Note Timeline. Building the timeline is a simple five-step process. It is not difficult, but it is time consuming. The process will stretch throughout the six weeks of the *Walking with God* experience.

The Post-it Note Timeline allows the learner to gain a solid, broad perspective on his or her life. Through discussion and guided reflection, participants can begin to see patterns that clarify how God has been working over the long haul. Even moments of pain and crisis can be seen as tools in the hands of God for preparing His followers for the current ministry the Lord has in mind for them.

Timeline: Step One—Brainstorming¹²

Each person will receive a piece of poster board 18 inches by 24 inches, a pen, one hundred yellow post-it notes and fifty pink post-it notes. Participants will brainstorm about all kinds of memories, people, and events from their past. On each yellow note, they will write two or three key words that concisely describe a specific person, story, or event from their life. Each person or event receives its own tiny sheet. The goal is to not write complete stories but key words or names that will be clear to the participant as a reminder of the whole event or story. During this brainstorming, they should not try to think chronologically or to put everything down in order. They are just thinking back over their life and writing down memories as they surface.

¹² Ibid., 15.

Here is an example from my own timeline. A single note simply has the name of a college professor who reached out to me as a student. The time this professor took to spend with me and make me feel significant was an enormous blessing, which helped me make some very important decisions. I did not need to write anything more than the professor's name to remind me of what that relationship meant.

To aid in this process it is a good idea to play some soft background music and project a list to remind them to think of events from the following categories: family, elementary school, middle school, high school, mentors, friends, relationships, places, jobs, disappointments, victories, conversion, “church” experiences. As they are writing, the leader will walk around continuing to prompt them to think of various categories, people, or experiences.

After about twenty to thirty minutes of brainstorming, when each person has around fifty or more notes, the leader will instruct them to begin placing notes on their poster board in chronological order. When notes are placed, it will be important to leave a margin of about two inches at the top and bottom of the board with no notes in it. Notes should begin with a column on the left, from top to bottom and continue with columns across the page to the right. Displaying a completed timeline will help them see how it should be organized. A projected slide with clear instructions also will be helpful.

Timeline: Step Two—Identifying Painful Moments¹³

Once this process has been completed, the next step is identifying any of the notes that describe a memory or event that was painful at the time it occurred. These memories

¹³ Ibid.

are transferred onto pink sticky notes. The yellow notes are then replaced by pink notes on the poster board.

When the pink notes are in place, it is time to begin looking for patterns or seek to gain some insight into God's hand in the past. Looking at the placement of the pink notes in the timeline can yield some profound insights into one's spiritual journey. The leader should encourage participants to consider certain questions for reflection (as seen in Appendix 1).

These questions are designed to help participants ponder the possible meaning of the painful moments in their life. The leader will guide participants to reflect on what was happening in their lives just prior to the events as well as after them to look for clues as to how God might have been shaping them through these events. These questions also will guide them to recognize changes in their perspective, values, or life direction as a result of these moments. They will consider and discuss these insights with those around their table, helping one another discern how God may have been working in their past.

After giving the group time to reflect on these questions, participants will share one or two key insights with a partner at their table. Some of these moments may be very personal and still rather painful. The leader will need to give the group permission to share only what is comfortable. Participants should be encouraged, however, to stretch their comfort level if they are willing. This kind of sharing often leads people to discover that they are not alone in their pain and fear. This time of reflection and sharing will close with a period of praying for one another. Each person will pray for the person who shared and ask God to give the individual peace and insight into how to best understand and grow from these lessons of the past.

Homework: Week One

The next step in building a personal timeline is to divide it into chapters. The purpose of this is to help organize the broader timeline into smaller sections to aid reflection. Consequently, each person will take five or six blue post-it notes to work on at home. Participants will write one chapter title on each note and place it in the margin at the top of the poster board. All of the yellow and pink notes are then organized in columns under these chapter titles.

Thinking over the broad span of their timeline, participants will divide it into no more than five or six chapters. Teens should have only three or four chapters. Adult leaders may have more chapters. Chapter transitions should roughly line up with major transition from one life stage to another. Titles should be creative and descriptive. They represent the steps in each person's life journey and say something about their story as a whole. For example, a fellow participant in my cohort with Walling shared with me how he titled his early life as "Tee-Ball," his elementary school years as "Pony League," his middle school and high school years as "Little League," his college years as "Working out the Minors," and his thirties and beyond as "Major League Life."¹⁴

Prayer Journal: Week One

The key passage for reflection this week is Jeremiah 29:10-14. The journal will give a brief description of the background and context for this passage. Through guided moments of prayer and reflection, participants will learn to make the connection between

¹⁴ Cohort participant, interview by author, Pasadena, CA, 2010.

the promise of God's provision in Jeremiah 29:11 and the human response of faith and trust in Jeremiah 29:12-13.

Memorizing Scripture is a key component of the Prayer Journal. For this reason, during this first week participants will memorize Jeremiah 29:11-13. Such a spiritual discipline can enhance participants' reflection on their personal timelines as they divide it into chapters.

Week Two

The second session of *Walking with God* focuses on life lessons and biblical characters. Participants will share their chapter titles and reflect on the major lessons learned in each chapter. Through this process, they will become better equipped to see how God has been involved in their life over the long term. This week also begins their reflection on a person of their choosing from the Bible. Through the Prayer Journal, they will begin to consider the lessons they can glean from this biblical character's life.

This can be a profound time of insight and learning as people recognize, perhaps for the first time, recurring patterns or types of experiences in their life. Through reflection and hindsight, they will begin to see how God has gifted and shaped them through their unique set of experiences. Coupling these insights with reflection on the life of a biblical character will begin to broaden their perspective of God's providence and guidance.

Timeline: Step Three—Life Chapters¹⁵

After a gathering prayer, participants will quote Jeremiah 29:11-13 together. The entire group will have a brief discussion on the impact this passage had in their reflection

¹⁵ Walling, *Perspective Time Line*, 16.

over the past week. To enhance this discussion, the leader should ask any who are willing to share how this reflection helped them understand or gain insight regarding life events from their timeline.

As a transition to the new session, the leader will ask participants to share their chapter titles around their table. Each person goes in turn, sharing chapter titles and explaining why he or she chose these titles and divided the chapters in a particular way. After everyone has shared around their tables, a few volunteers will share their titles with the entire group. This begins the session with group interaction and a positive sense of the progress everyone is making through personal reflection.

Timeline: Step Four—Life Lessons¹⁶

To set up the reflection on life lessons, the group will share in a brief study of Deuteronomy 8:1-14. In this passage, Israel is about to go into the Promised Land. God commands them to remember all that He has done in their past. He warns them that they are likely to forget His providence and begin to feel as though they do not need Him when they settle into their new lives and comfortable homes in the future. He goes on to say that if they do forget Him and turn to other gods, it will not go well for them. From Israel's history, it was clear God was right.

Similarly, if participants fail to recognize insights from their past concerning God's guidance and provision, they risk becoming like ancient Israel. To forget what God has done in their personal stories will leave them ill equipped for the future and vulnerable to repeating the painful past. Failure to reflect on what God has done in their

¹⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

personal past or a refusal to learn from the lessons born of personal reflection can rob them of the present and even the future for which God has been shaping them.

Reflection on the past is most useful when it is coupled with seeking God's wisdom and guidance. Participants need to seek God's wisdom to help them interpret what their past means for the present and the future. Before moving on to reflect on life lessons from their timelines, the leader will guide them in a time of prayer, asking God for the necessary wisdom to interpret their life lessons correctly.

To aid in reflection on their life stories, participants will be given green sticky notes. While reflecting on their life story, they will discern two or three lessons learned from each chapter. Participants will write these lessons on the green notes and place them in the lower margin on the poster board, under their respective chapter. The leader will guide participants to think through certain questions to help guide their reflection.¹⁷

These questions will guide participants to identify patterns of behavior or activities that might give clues to broad patterns in their story. These may lead them to recognize patterns they need to change or capitalize on in order to be more effective in living out the story God intends for them to live. Reflecting on their past experiences may enable them to see how they have been equipped by God or prepared for dealing with present or future circumstances. This kind of reflection also enables them to recognize parts of their story which may be useful in encouraging others or sharing the message of hope and faith with people in ways they had not previously recognized. In the end, the hope is that reflecting on life lessons from the various chapters of their timeline will help

¹⁷ See Appendix 1 for a list of these questions.

them to see how God has been at work shaping and equipping them for their own good and the good of others.

After about twenty minutes of reflecting on their timeline and writing down lessons, participants are encouraged to share a few insights with a partner. After about five to seven minutes of sharing, they are encouraged to pray for one another. Sharing insights with someone else at their table will help participants clarify and better articulate the lessons they glean from their timeline. As they close this time together in prayer, participants will build closer relationships and gain the added benefit of mutual support and encouragement.

Homework: Week Two

Following the prayer time, participants will be instructed to take as many green post-it notes as they want. During this week they are to refine their timeline, pausing to further reflect and add additional lessons for each chapter. The purpose of this is to encourage them to look more closely at what God has done through each chapter of their life. These valuable insights can help them to articulate more clearly how God has worked in their past. These insights can open the door to stronger faith in the present and the future.

In addition, participants will choose one person from the Bible whose life story they will contemplate over the coming weeks. This should be a character with whom they closely relate. Participants will be encouraged to choose a character whose story has long inspired them or given them meaningful insight. In the Prayer Journal, the content for this week will guide them to begin reading and reflecting on their chosen character's story.

Prayer Journal: Week Two

The key passage for this week is John 14:1-20. Through guided prayer and meditation, participants will reflect on the two key promises from Jesus in this passage. The first comes from John 14:1-4. It is the hope of a place with the Father, which Jesus has “gone away to prepare.” This truth will help participants hold out ultimate hope for the future. The second promise is that those who love Jesus and keep His commands will have the Holy Spirit to guide them into truth. This insight will aid them in reflecting over their timeline and the life story of their biblical character. Participants will be guided to memorize these two key texts: John 14:1-4 and 14:15-17.

The Prayer Journal also will direct them to choose a biblical character whose life story they will reflect on in the coming weeks. They can choose any character they want except for Jesus. Each day, during this week, they will reflect on this character’s story. If participants choose someone like Moses or David, whose entire life story is so long that it would prohibit in-depth reflection, they will choose one episode from the character’s life upon which to reflect. For example, if their character is Moses, they might choose his call from God at the burning bush. The Prayer Journal will guide them to select a significant pericope, which can guide them into meaningful reflection.

Week Three

Session Three leads participants to reflect on the life story of their chosen biblical character. The purpose of this is for them to begin seeking out a biblical mentor. By closely examining this person’s life story from Scripture, participants can glean spiritual principles and patterns of behavior to help them in their own walk with God. This week is

all about discerning how faithful people in the Bible trusted God and how God carried them into their personal future. Participants will take a break from adding to their personal timeline in favor of discerning how God worked in the life of this biblical character.

Describing a Biblical Mentor

After an opening prayer, participants will share their memory work for the last two weeks. As a group, they will recite Jeremiah 29:11-13. Then they will pair up with someone at their table. One person will quote John 14:1-4, and the other will quote John 14:15-17. After this, they will take five to seven minutes to share a few insights they have gleaned from this process so far with the other people at their table.

The next step in this session is for participants to tell those at their table about the biblical character they have chosen. They will share why they chose that character and some of the insights they have gained from their story this past week. The ensuing discussion will take up the remainder of this session.

Table groups should be instructed to take their time to thoroughly and openly discuss all the questions that will be listed for them regarding biblical life stories.¹⁸ This discussion will lead them to share times of trial and victory in their character's story. They will focus on lessons the character learned as well as lessons he or she should have learned but failed to act upon. After discussing the consequences of these victories and failures the discussion will shift to how each person around the table connects with their

¹⁸ Ibid.

biblical character. Focusing on how they relate to these biblical characters will help them see how God wants to use the stories of these people to affect their own life story.

Just before time for this session has expired, the seminar leader will call the groups back together. Participants will receive instructions regarding the homework for the next week and a reminder to continue in the Prayer Journal. The session will close with prayer in their table groups. The prayer should focus on asking God to help each member gain insight into the Lord's will regarding each person's gifts and decisions about the future.

Homework: Week Three

The homework for this week focuses specifically on the biblical character each person has chosen. Participants will direct their reflection on the character's life story by writing a monologue from the biblical character's perspective. The Prayer Journal will guide them in this process.

In particular, they will choose a specific turning point or event in the life of this biblical character and create the monologue as though the character were describing the event in his or her own words. Then, the monologue will be refined. Participants will refer to the monologue as a way to personalize their reflection on the biblical mentor in the weeks to come.

Prayer Journal: Week Three

The key passage this week is Matthew 6:19-34. Prayer and reflection will focus on this teaching from Jesus in the sermon on the mount. Participants will reflect on how planning and dreaming about the future is not forbidden, but worrying about the future is.

Part of the reflection will remind them of the previous passages from Jeremiah 29 and John 14. Coupling those passages with this one illustrates that God is in control of our present and our future. He promises to bless and take care of those who faithfully trust in Him. The memory passage for this week is Matthew 6:19 and Matthew 6:33-34.

Ambitious students may decide to memorize the entire passage, but these three verses act as bookends to this teaching and will suffice to help participants remember the message.

The Prayer Journal also will direct participants to choose an event from their Bible character's life and write about it as if the character were describing the event in his or her own words. The result will be a monologue from their biblical character describing an important event in his or her life. Participants will share these with their group at the next session.

Week Four

This session will open with prayer and sharing the memorized Scripture passages. Afterwards, participants will share the monologues they have written with the group members at their table. This activity will lead into a discussion based on guided questions.¹⁹

After everyone has shared a monologue, participants will be asked to describe why they chose to write about that particular time or event in the biblical character's life. The table leader will try to get all participants to reflect on how their own life story is similar to the life story of the biblical character they have chosen. These similarities or affinities with biblical characters can help lead the group to see how this life story can

¹⁹ Ibid.

impact the life of each participant. In this sense, participants will be encouraged to begin thinking of these biblical people as spiritual mentors in their lives.

Timeline: Step 5—A Vision for the Future

Following the discussion, participants will turn back to their personal timelines with bright green post-it notes. They will reflect on this question: “Where do you want to be and what do you want to be doing ten years from now?” To respond, participants will write life events on the bright green notes and add a future chapter to their personal timeline.

During this process, table leaders will guide them to draw from all they have experienced and have learned through this seminar to complete the task seriously and prayerfully. They will consider their giftedness, experiences, and lessons learned from Scripture. In essence, they will dare to dream and envision what God may want them to accomplish and become in the next ten years.

Prayer Journal: Week Four

Scripture meditation for this week will return to the three passages from the initial three gatherings. Exercises in prayer and meditation will encourage participants to go deeper in their reliance on God for the future based on the truths in these texts.

Participants will refine their personal timeline, giving special attention to the chapter about the future. The journal also will prompt them to think critically about connections between them and their chosen biblical mentor. Participants will come to the next session prepared to share some of what they have learned and how these insights help inform their vision for the future.

Week Five

After an opening prayer, a special prize will be offered to the first person who can successfully recite Jeremiah 29:11-13; John 14:1-3, 15-17; and Matthew 6:19, 33-34. Following this, the entire group will recite these verses together. This will lead into an open discussion of the best insights group members have from these passages throughout the entire seminar.

Timeline: Step 5: Life Stories and the Greater Story of God

After this large group discussion, table groups will work together in smaller units and go deeper. Participants will share the connections they have recognized between their biblical mentor and themselves. Group leaders will ask follow-up questions to help the group reflect with spiritual depth and develop common insights about faith and following God.

After about thirty minutes of small group discussion, the leader will call all groups together. He or she will lead a discussion designed to pull together everything that has been covered in the entire seminar. Using a brief Bible study based on Hebrews 11, the leader will challenge participants with the idea that their life stories are just as much a part of the great story God has been writing in history as are the characters of the Bible. Participants will be encouraged to believe that they matter to God. They will be challenged to believe that they have an important role to play in bringing God's Kingdom to rule in the world today just as much as biblical characters did in their era. Following

this presentation, participants will go back to their table groups to discuss another round of questions.²⁰

These questions will focus on the concept of living as a part of the grand story God has been writing from the beginning. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on the impact this truth has on their lives if they truly believe it. At the end of this discussion, they will be encouraged to reflect on their timelines. Looking back at how God has shaped and equipped them in their past, they will be encouraged to dream about what God might lead them to be and do in the future.

Group leaders will give participants about ten minutes to reflect on their timeline. After this reflection, participants will share their future chapter with the rest of their group. This small group time will close with group members praying for one another as they make plans for the future with the desire of honoring God with their stories. When all groups are finished praying, the seminar leader will call the groups together to explain the homework and Prayer Journal task for the last week. The session will close with a group prayer.

Prayer Journal: Week Five

The key passage for this week is Hebrews 12:1-3. The daily prayers and reflections will focus on reviewing the lessons learned over the past weeks. They will also encourage participants to memorize this great passage and put it to work in their lives.

²⁰ Ibid.

Homework for this week will be to refine the biblical mentor monologue and personal timeline. Participants will prepare to share the monologue and major insights from their timeline. This sharing will happen with parents and family members at the celebration dinner at the last session of the *Walking with God* seminar.

Week Six: Celebration

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the goals in the lives of teenagers laid out in this project. The focused study of their own life story and the idea of connecting their story to the story of God are powerful tools for Christian identity formation. Sharing this process with significant adults in their lives increases its impact.

The last session of the seminar is a time of celebration and reflection. Much of the literature stemming from recent research calls for this type of significant faith interaction between adolescents and adults. In the conclusion of *Soul Searching*, Smith and Denton make a sweeping recommendation for parents, youth workers, and church leaders who desire to help make faith more significant in teenagers' lives. They strongly encourage spending more time teaching students the precepts of faith. An important part of this is giving adolescents opportunities to practice articulating their beliefs and the difference they make in their lives.²¹ Dean echoes this conclusion when she writes: "If telling the story of God in Jesus Christ is necessary for confessing Christian identity to God and others—families and congregations must participate in telling the story to teenagers and must help them tell it for themselves."²²

²¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 266-268.

²² Dean, *Almost Christian*, 146.

The importance of the faith community also comes through clearly in the recent research conclusions from Fuller Seminary. Clark confirms the importance of adult voices in the life of teens when he stresses how “several positive voices and supportive relationships must be present to have an effect on the life of a child.”²³ He and Powell develop this concept more fully in *Sticky Faith*:

The concept of identity includes both a personal dimension, as in “who I see myself to be as distinct to others” and a communal dimension, as in, “who I am as connected to others,” . . . In building a Sticky Faith, who I seek to be has to be bigger than just me and my dreams. A rich and sustainable faith recognizes that as I walk in community with God’s people, I ultimately discover who I am.”²⁴

Not only do researchers recognize the importance of adults and significant conversations about faith in the lives of teens, it seems that teens recognize this for themselves as well. In *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition*, Powell, Griffin, and Crawford share findings from interviews with teens. Among other factors, teens name their relationship with their parents and their connection with youth workers as significant in their faith development. When college students were asked what they would want more of if they could repeat their youth group experience, the top answer was more deep conversations about faith.²⁵

In light of all of these findings, the final session of the *Walking with God* seminar is a celebration dinner with the families of participants. This is not just a time of fellowship or a night of fun. It is a confirmation of all the hard work that participants have done throughout the seminar. For the adolescents involved, this will become an important moment of validation and connection. This time of blessing, when significant

²³ Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 202.

²⁴ Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 58-59.

²⁵ Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition*, 137-145.

adults affirm and celebrate them for taking their Christian faith seriously, is a potentially holy moment in the lives of teens. This could be one of the most significant faith events in their walk with Christ.

Consequently, this should be a well-planned evening. Invitations to family members will be sent out in advance. This might be a good thing to do during Week One in the seminar or as soon as all the participants are known. This will allow families to make plans in advance to attend. Ample food and decorations should be provided, making the night enjoyable for all who attend. While this does not need to be a terribly formal or expensive event, neither should it feel thrown together at the last minute.

The program for the evening will highlight the participants. The seminar leader will begin with very brief comments about the content of the *Walking with God* seminar. He or she then will invite the participants to come up one at a time and share what they have prepared.

Each person will read their biblical mentor monologue and share a few insights from their timeline. They will be encouraged to specifically emphasize how the *Walking with God* experience has impacted their view of themselves, their relationship with God, and their plans and goals for the future. While all participants will be encouraged to share, those who are too shy or lack confidence to speak in front of a large group will not be forced to do so. It is crucial, however, that every participant is celebrated. The seminar leader will need to find creative solutions for celebrating those who do not speak. It may be empowering for them, and perhaps even more impactful, if they are allowed to have a parent or adult group leader speak for them or stand beside them and collaborate in sharing their monologue and goals.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The *Walking with God* seminar is designed to be an annual event at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. My personal hope is that it become a rite of passage for high school juniors and seniors toward the end of their high school careers. If successful, it can help teens develop significant relationships with key adults. It also will lead them to understand their personal significance in the Kingdom of God. Essentially, participants will be grounded more deeply in their faith and become better equipped to carry that faith with them through the transition to college and into adulthood.

Launching the Pilot Program and Leadership Development for Small Groups

As mentioned in Chapter 6, the success of the seminar with teenagers relies on the successful experience of trained adults. There must be significant groundwork laid to ensure this happens. Consequently, I will work in conjunction with the Youth Committee at the Conejo church to prayerfully consider and invite adult members to be part of the initial pilot program.

The overriding objective of the *Walking with God* experience is for all involved to discover how God has designed them to play a vital part in His ongoing story. The first task is for leaders in the training process to understand that they must take this journey for themselves before they are ready to serve as a leader for a small group of teens. They will learn from their seminar leader how to be a group leader for teens. In short, this is a process of discipleship. Arnold's definition of a "discipleship group" is an apt description of how small groups will function in the *Walking with God* experience: "A discipleship group tends to be . . . focused on personal and spiritual growth . . . those who have been 'discipled' are free to go forth and minister because they have been empowered in their relationship to God and to others. This group time is spent in self- and God-reflection with others who want to grow in their faith."¹

A three-step leadership training process is built into the *Walking with God* experience. First, adults who wish to be leaders will learn through experiencing the program with other adults and watching how their group leader takes them through the seminar. The second time they go through the experience, they will serve as table guides for a small group of teens, as several groups are led through the seminar in a larger setting. Finally, after going through the seminar and material twice, they will be ready to lead a small group through the experience on their own.

Much of the leadership training will come naturally, as adults learn the process of the Post-it Note Timeline and go through the exercises in the Prayer Journal. However, there are other lessons about the character of a leader and the specific role of a small

¹ Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 194-195.

group leader that need to be spelled out clearly. As adult leaders experience the *Walking with God* seminar for the first time, their leader periodically will take an aside to talk about these dynamics and qualities. Potential adult leaders will be encouraged to trust the process, embrace a vision of the present Kingdom of God, and embody key aspects of a mature character.

Leaders Trust the Process

Good leaders are willing learners. In order to be an effective leader in this process, adults first must be humble enough to take the process seriously for themselves. The adult leader must be willing to put in the time and energy necessary for this to happen. This is a key principle that adult leaders must understand, if they are ever to effectively disciple teens in a small group.

As adults work through *Walking with God* for themselves, I will evaluate their willingness to give themselves to the process. Any adults who do not engage in the creation of the personal timeline, practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation, or complete the activities connected to a biblical mentor will be challenged to evaluate their priorities and whether or not they are a good fit for serving as a *Walking with God* leader. If they choose not to seriously engage themselves in the process, they will be released from the leadership training.

Leaders Embrace a Vision of the Present Kingdom of God

As mentioned above, a key component of this experience is recognizing that one's own story is ultimately part of the larger story of God. Small group leaders must understand the significance of this principle. While guiding potential adult leaders

through the *Walking with God* experience for their first time, as the main facilitator I will share segments of material from Willard and Wright to help them recognize the importance of understanding that the Christian life is lived in the present Kingdom of God.²

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard builds a strong case to show that salvation is more than just intellectual assent or a moment that gets people into heaven after they die. It is a process of life lived in connection with God and under His rule. He argues that in Jesus, God continues the same work He always has been doing. Willard also writes that Jesus shows how forgiveness, discipleship, and entrance into heaven are natural parts of life lived in relationship with God, under His rule today: “And in this he only continues the teachings of the Old Testament. The entire biblical tradition from beginning to end is one of intimate involvement of God in human life.”³ Wright adds to this insight by stating explicitly, “The whole point of the gospels is to tell the story of how God became king, on earth as in heaven.”⁴

Adults who wish to be small group leaders will be challenged to see their life story as a continuance of the story of the rule of God. That is the point of the personal timeline and biblical mentor exercises. Small group leaders must understand that through obedience and careful attention to the Spirit of God, they are empowered to live the life God intended for them. They, and the students they will lead, are meant to live under the

² Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 19-33, 155-158, 182-183, 273-281; Wright, *How God Became King*, 83-126, 175-252.

³ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 47.

⁴ Wright, *How God Became King*, 34.

rule of God today, in relationship with their Creator fulfilling His design and vision for the world in their time just as He did in the lives of men and women in the Bible.

Adult leaders also will receive direction regarding the spiritual disciplines that are central to the *Walking with God* seminar. As the main trainer, I will give them synopses of *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Willard and the sections on prayer, meditation, and study from R. Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*.⁵ The purpose of these synopses is not to replace the works of Willard and Foster but to increase interest in these resources so that potential adult leaders are motivated to read them for themselves.

Qualities of a Small Group Leader

Arnold describes several qualities of an effective small group leader.⁶ Four of these are especially pertinent to the adults who will lead teens through this experience. Each of these characteristics is examined in the paragraphs that follow. Adults who function as effective small group leaders for this experience will need to embrace being ethical, sensitive listeners, vulnerable and transparent in appropriate ways, willing servants, and willing to devote the necessary time and energy to develop relationships and lead well.

The fact that a leader needs to be ethical and honest may seem obvious, but it is a necessary trait that must be highlighted in leadership training. Adults must be reminded that they should not think they can just go through the motions and expect teens to take seminar assignments seriously. This is especially true regarding time spent in spiritual

⁵ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 11-27, 75-94, 156-172; R. Foster, *Celebration of the Disciplines*, 15-46, 62-76.

⁶ Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 55-67.

disciplines. Adult integrity is crucial for a leader's development as well as for the development of the group he or she leads.

An effective leader is also sensitive and grace-driven in listening to students, especially when they are sharing about their lives and personal struggles. The small group leader's attitude toward group members will set the example for how group members listen to and treat one another within the group. There will be times when a student will share something very sensitive and difficult to talk about. The group leader must pick up on the importance of this moment and be able to guide the group to respond and listen appropriately. At other times, leaders will need to gently guide students to clarify their thoughts or open up about an important event in their timeline or insight from their biblical character's story. The group leader must have the attention and insight to do this in a way that honors the individual student and gives others permission to share or offer support.

Additionally, adult leaders will model how to share one's story and be transparent about times of victory and difficulty. However, just because an adult has experienced it does not mean that teens need to hear all about every detail. An effective adult leader understands when and how much to share. Leaders need to be vulnerable and honest in sharing their experiences but only as a means to opening the door for teens to share their stories. A quality leader will engage in this principle and only share appropriately, remembering that his or her audience is teenagers who need to be encouraged to share appropriately as well. The leader's example is the key to making the group a safe place to share and respond to others.

Another vital part of the example the adult leaders need to model is willingness to serve their small group and others around them. It is an act of service to be a small group leader in the first place, but this is just the beginning of the example teens need to see. Small group leaders must serve together to set up and take down before and after sessions. They must be willing to go out of their way, within reason, to help their students beyond scheduled meeting times. Teens may need a ride to or from a session from time to time. A service-oriented small group leader will know how to provide help like this within the parameters of safe conduct. This will be explained in accordance with the policies of the Conejo Youth Ministry. There are many other ways that a small group leader may be called upon to serve the group members. These offer good opportunities to enhance relationships within the group and make the experience better for all involved.

Timeline

The Youth Committee will receive an overview of the *Walking with God* seminar in June 2015. In August 2015, I will meet with the Youth Committee to discuss their impressions of the seminar and prayerfully consider a list of adults to invite to be part of the pilot program. Following that discussion, the plan outlined below will be put in place to move forward with a pilot program in the winter and spring of 2016.

September through November 2015: Preparing Materials and Recruiting Adults

The training materials for the seminar will be developed and refined between September and November 2015. These materials include the updated PowerPoint slides

for seminar sessions. The Prayer Journal also will be refined and published according to the outline in Chapter 6.

Collaborating with the staff in the church office, I will design a new *Walking with God* logo for use in all advertising, publications, and presentation slides. This advertising includes flyers to give to families of teens, slides for presentation before and after regular Sunday morning worship services, and a spotlight story on the Conejo church website.

During this time, the Youth Committee and I will recruit the first set of adult volunteers for training. I will send an initial email with a formal invitation to each person on the list. Either a member of the Youth Committee or I will follow up with each person individually to clearly communicate the commitment the training and seminar require. Each volunteer will be asked to commit or decline by December 1, 2015. The adult seminar and small group leader training will begin in January 2016.

January and June 2016: Pilot Program

Over the first six months of 2016, the pilot program for *Walking with God* will roll out. Adult leaders will go through the seminar in January and February. They will receive small group leader training as a part of the seminar, as outlined in Chapter 6.

After the adult leaders have been through the seminar and small group leader training, the *Walking with God* experience with these leaders and teens will launch in March. Advertising for this seminar will begin in January. A spotlight story will go live on the church website, describing the seminar coming up in March. This spotlight will offer a brief overview of the seminar content, its target audience, seminar dates, and the time commitment it will require.

In mid-February, high school students will receive a more detailed introduction to the seminar at their annual Winter Retreat. I will describe the seminar and help them understand its purpose and time commitment. I will answer any questions and give them each a flyer with all of the seminar information.

During that same week, the church office staff will add presentation slides to the Sunday morning announcement slides before all worship assemblies. They also will insert flyers in *Family News*, the Sunday bulletin handed out at every worship service at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. For the next month, the announcement slides will run and seminar flyers will be on display at the welcome center in the church building foyer. I also will make verbal announcements about the seminar at all worship services for three weeks prior to the seminar.

The *Walking with God* seminar with students and adult leaders will kick off in mid-March. It will end by June 1, 2016. The Youth Committee and I will complete the assessment of the pilot program by the end of June 2016.

June 2016: Program Evaluation

Hopefully after teens and adults have been through the *Walking with God* seminar, they will be equipped to speak articulately about how God is involved in their lives. They will have spent a significant amount of time reflecting on their story and the life story of a biblical character. This should allow them to glean important insights into how God shapes lives and uses people to write the grand story He has been writing from the beginning. This should give participants insight into their own relationship with God,

their purpose in life, and their identity as a child of God. With this confidence, they should be better equipped to live out their faith and share faith stories with others.

To help assess the effectiveness of the seminar, participants will fill out a survey of five questions that will assess their perceptions about the topics listed in the paragraph above.⁷ They will be given the same questionnaire before and after the *Walking with God* seminar. This will allow a clear picture of how their perceptions have been affected by the *Walking with God* experience.

Within two weeks following the seminar, members of the Youth Committee and I will conduct post-seminar interviews with participants. Interviewers will ask key questions to help assess the effectiveness of the seminar and evaluate how it could be improved.

The questions that form the basis of these interviews will assess every aspect of the *Walking with God* seminar. Participants will be invited to discuss what they learned from both the personal timeline exercise and the Prayer Journal. They will be asked to describe how reflecting on a biblical mentor impacted them and whether it has made a difference. Participants will have the opportunity to talk about which aspects of the spiritual disciplines they found most useful. Finally, they will have the opportunity to share their overall impressions of the seminar and whether they would recommend it to others. This time of assessment is intended to be a candid conversation where the effectiveness of the experience can be critiqued and improved for future groups.

The Youth Committee and I will compile and evaluate all of the interviewers' notes and participant feedback between June and August 2016. Together we will produce

⁷ See Appendix 2 for a list of these questions.

a report of these findings, place it on the church website, and make hard copies available to the elders of the Conejo Valley Church of Christ and anyone else who is interested. Between August and November, we will make all the necessary changes and updates to the training materials and the Prayer Journal based on feedback from participants. This will allow the materials to be prepared for repeating this entire process in 2017.

January 2017: Cycle Begins Again

In January 2017, adult leaders who successfully guided a group in 2016 will be invited to repeat the process with a new group of teens. Strong leaders who have a grasp of the process likely will be even more effective guiding a new group of students. Hopefully, this will begin to form a positive culture in which adults and teens come to expect positive experiences and growth through the *Walking with God* seminar.

In the event that any adult leaders prove not to be well suited to the leadership task, I will follow up with them. I will guide them to either find another area in which to serve or make the necessary changes for them to lead again. With the well-being of students in mind, I will make the final decision regarding which group leaders are invited to lead again. If there are leadership slots to fill, new leader training will be offered within the same monthly time frame as in 2016. The entire seminar process then will repeat just as it did in the pilot program.

Resources

As outlined above, the *Walking with God* seminar will happen in three different formats. Leadership training will occur with me and potential adult leaders. In the pilot program, several small groups will meet together with me functioning as seminar leader

and adult leaders as table guides for each small group of teens. Finally, adult leaders will repeat the process with a new small group of teens in subsequent seminars.

The Prayer Journal and training materials for the Post-It Note Timeline will be identical for all three of these venues. The only exception is additional material on leadership training from Willard, Wright, and R. Foster for adult leaders. Each venue will need audiovisual equipment to enhance the seminar experience and display training material. Seminar leaders will need presentation software and a projector or large digital display to share slides of the training material. They also will need a means to play soft music in the background as participants work on their personal timeline.

Since this seminar requires a great deal of discussion as well as times of reflection and introspection, it seems wise to make participants as comfortable as possible. For this reason, the facilitator and group leaders will provide bottles of water and simple snacks at each table. This can help participants relax and feel more comfortable.

The three distinct formats for the *Walking with God* seminar will happen with three different-sized groups of people. Each of these group sizes comes with its own need for space and set up. These varied groups involve leadership training, the pilot program with teens and adults, and the adult leader with a single group.

Leadership training will take place in a medium-sized room that is properly lit and comfortable. Participants will sit at tables in groups of three to five people at each table. The tables must be large enough for each person to work with a personal poster board.

The pilot program involving both teens and adults is the largest of the groups gathering for the *Walking with God* experience. Since this potentially could be eight to ten small groups with a table leader and three to four teens at each table, this venue

requires a large well-lighted room. Again, the tables must be sizable enough for each person to work with a piece of poster board 18 inches by 24 inches. The room must be large enough that tables are not too cramped. There needs to be enough space in the room for participants to be comfortable. Each table group needs enough distance from the other groups to be able to have discussion without too much distraction.

Finally, the adult leader with one small group is perhaps the size with the most flexible format for the *Walking with God* seminar. One adult leader with a small group of teens could go through this process in a small classroom in a church building or even in a comfortable home setting. The venue possibilities are open as long as the requirements for table space and privacy can be met so that participants can focus on building their timelines and have effective group discussion.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The majority of high school students in the Thousand Oaks area are capable and highly motivated. They live in an affluent community that offers many excellent opportunities for social and personal development. The median income for the area and home values are well above the state and national average.¹ High schools in the surrounding school districts rank highly in the state of California for academics, the arts, and the quality of their extracurricular activities. The city of Thousand Oaks offers a plethora of programs in sports and the arts year round. In short, Thousand Oaks and the surrounding Conejo Valley provide a wonderful atmosphere for raising a family and making children's lives rich with opportunity.

Families who attend the Conejo Valley Church of Christ typically take full advantage of all the Thousand Oaks area has to offer. While this gives teens multiple opportunities to stretch and grow in many different areas, it also can leave families with schedules that are packed full of activity almost every day of the week. As the survey results in Chapter 2 illustrate, high school students from the Conejo Valley Church of Christ are often busy with school and extracurricular activities for twelve or more hours a day, Monday through Friday. Many of their weekends also are taken up with practices, games, or performances.

With such over-programmed lives, many Conejo church families fail to make time for focused spiritual reflection or practice beyond Sunday morning church attendance. Spiritual habits and disciplines get squeezed out by the pressure to prepare for

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. "California, State and County Quick Facts."

school, or to practice and perform for extracurricular activities. In this atmosphere, many high school students are developing their personal identity based on what they do.

Without significant spiritual guidance, most teens who attend the Conejo Valley Church of Christ tend to base their identity on their activities, largely absent of significant spiritual reflection. They may be active members of the youth group and count other youth group members as their closest friends but still base their identity on largely secular activities. As they move through their high school years, their academic and extracurricular commitments steal what time they have for serious spiritual connection and reflection. This project attempts to offer a solution to that problem.

The *Walking with God* Seminar is a six-week experience designed to help teenagers discover their identity through their relationship with God. Recognizing that connection with adults is a key factor in adolescent faith development, this seminar connects adults and teens throughout the process. Parents of teenagers and other interested adults will serve as small group leaders and mentors to participating teens during the seminar.

The seminar has three major components that help participants focus on their connection to God. The first is a personal timeline exercise, enabling them to chart their life story. The second is a guided period of prayer and Bible study, where they will reflect on a character from the Bible and learn to see him or her as a spiritual mentor. Finally, there is the Prayer Journal which they will follow for Bible study, reflection, and personal prayer between weekly sessions.

The timeline experience is based on Walling's Post-it Note Timeline.² The original exercise is designed for adults. In the *Walking with God* seminar, the process is modified to apply to both adults and adolescents. The specific target audience is high school juniors and seniors. This timeline exercise leads participants to outline their life story and reflect on how God has been active in their personal history. They also will reflect on their gifts and experiences to set goals and dreams for the future.

The second component of the experience is focused prayer and study based on the life story of a biblical character. Participants will choose a person from the Bible who has been a favorite for them or whose story has been meaningful. Through directed reflection and prayer, they will draw from this life story in Scripture and learn to apply lessons from their chosen person's life in their own life. In this sense, they will learn to see how this biblical person can act as a spiritual mentor for them. The entire process will empower students and adults to see how their life story fits into the larger story of God.

Along with helping teens recognize their identity as participants in the grand story of God, the seminar seeks to help them develop spiritual disciplines for their ongoing development. While small groups will meet once a week to help those in the seminar work through the timeline and biblical mentor exercises, participants will engage with the Prayer Journal for daily readings and reflection throughout the week. These exercises will guide them to think deeply about how God has gifted them and worked in their past. It also will help them reflect on their biblical mentor. They will be encouraged to see

² Walling, *Perspective Time Line*, 7-8.

patterns and connections between how God worked in the life of this biblical character and how He wants to work in their lives as well.

Scripture memorization and application are key components of the Prayer Journal exercises. Each week it will guide participants to reflect and interact with Scripture for ten to fifteen minutes a day, five days a week. In the weekly small group sessions, teens and adults will share the passages they have memorized and discuss insights they have gained from the Prayer Journal throughout the week.

The final meeting of the *Walking with God* seminar is a celebration meal for the participants and their families. This is an important time of closure and affirmation for teens. As families come together for a celebration meal, the teens will describe one or two insights they gained from the personal timeline. They will be encouraged to talk about how they can see the hand of God in their past and how this gives them hope for the future.

They also will share a monologue they wrote as part of their reflection on their biblical mentor. The monologue is written from the biblical character's perspective, as if he or she were telling the teen about a significant personal event. Students will read the monologue and talk briefly about how their biblical mentor influences their life.

It is difficult to overcome the problem of over-programmed teens. The major difficulty is that there are no immediate, yet negative, consequences for missing a youth group event or not having a consistent practice of spiritual reflection. If a student misses a school choir rehearsal, the musical director can lower a grade. If an adolescent misses practice, the soccer coach can bench the teen for the next game. No youth minister can discipline a young person for choosing choir rehearsal over youth group by not letting

him or her sing at the next worship time. A small group leader cannot keep adolescents from reading the Bible at the next small group meeting, because they skipped last week for a soccer tournament. I suppose a leader could do something like this: But to what end? What would be the point?

When students are so busy, it is very hard to help them develop the spiritual habits they need to grow in Christ. When their families also are overscheduled, the task is even more difficult. There is no question that the *Walking with God* seminar is not the perfect solution to this problem. It is, however, a step in the right direction for those who will take advantage of it.

Not every high school junior and senior in the Conejo youth group will make the time to be part of this experience. For some, the thought of giving up six Sunday afternoons will feel oppressive. These same teens and parents, however, think nothing of giving their time to a sport for sixteen to twenty weeks at a time. For those who make the time investment, I believe it will be a life-altering experience.

As more take advantage of this program over time, its power and effectiveness will spread by word of mouth. As parents and teens share their insights and talk about what they gained, more parents and teens will make it a priority in the years to come. As the author, I dream of a day when *Walking with God* will be a well-established rite of passage for juniors and seniors at the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. I prayerfully hope to see dozens of teens in future years who have recognized their purpose and identity wrapped up in the story of God. I envision them in solid mentoring relationships with key adults who helped them reflect on their life stories and recognize their giftedness and purpose in the present Kingdom of God. By the grace of God, I pray that this experience

catches fire and I see the day that people from the Conejo Valley Church of Christ are taking the *Walking with God* seminar—or another event which grows from it and is even more effective—to other churches and building the Kingdom in the hearts of young people there.

APPENDIX 1

WALKING WITH GOD REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Below is the list of questions I developed specifically for the different stages of the Walking with God seminar.

Timeline: Step 2—Identifying Painful Moments (Week 1)

1. What was happening just prior to your most painful pink notes? Did you see this hard time coming? Looking back, can you see God's hand in preparing you for this or in bringing you through it?
2. After your pink notes, can you see times of growth or change through your timeline? Is God's care or providence evident in this time following your times of pain? If so, how?
3. The pink notes tend to clump up for most of us. Is this true for you? What lessons might you learn about yourself or about your faith from looking back over these painful periods where life seemed hard for a while?
4. Looking back, do you see any patterns of pain or growth that might be clues to you regarding whom God has been shaping or equipping you to be as a result of your life experiences?

Timeline: Step 4—Life Lessons (Week 2)

1. As you look over each chapter, are there broad insights you can glean from an accumulation of experiences? Are there any patterns you can see which might inform you of behaviors that God would have you recognize or change in the present or the future?
2. Looking back over your life do you see how God has prepared you for today? Has He brought you through certain experiences in order to make you better equipped for today or what is ahead? What are these experiences and what difference do you believe God would have their lessons bring about in you?
3. What stories or experiences from your past could be useful or impactful to others in their spiritual journey if they knew about it?
4. What hard times are there in your past which God has used to make you a stronger or better person?
5. What good things in your past have clearly been used by God to make you the person you are today?

Describing a Biblical Mentor (Week 3)

1. As you read about your character from the Bible, what were the main lessons you think this character learned from his or her experiences?
2. Was there any place in their story where they likely should have learned from the past but did not? Was there any place in the story that they clearly did learn from the past and apply it to their present situation? What happened and what was the outcome?
3. Describe a time when this person faced uncertainty about the future. How did he or she handle that? What did God do in response to their faith or lack of faith?
4. What lessons from this person's life most easily apply to you?
5. What might you learn about looking to your own future from the example of this character from the Bible?

Biblical Character Monologue Questions (Week 4)

1. Why did you choose to write this particular event in your Bible character's life?
2. What are some similarities between this event and events in your life? Are there other ways that you relate to this Bible character?
3. A mentor is a person who comes alongside someone else to act as a guide and help him or her learn and grow. In what ways could this biblical character act as a spiritual mentor to you?

Life Stories and the Greater Story of God (Week 5)

1. What do you think of the idea that each of us is a part of the great story God has been writing from the beginning? Is that correct? Why do you think so?
2. If this is true, how does it change the way you view your life? Why?
3. Does this idea have any impact on how you want to live in the future? How does it impact your decision for college, or career?
4. Take a look at your Post-It Note Timeline. Spend a few minutes thinking through what you wrote in your chapter about the next ten years. Is there anything there you would change when you think about being part of the great story of God? Take some time to reflect on that and your timeline.

APPENDIX 2

PRE- AND POST-SEMINAR QUESTIONNAIRE

Walking with God Questionnaire

How obvious is God's hand in your everyday life?

Very Obvious				Unclear
1	2	3	4	5

Stories of people from the Bible have had a tremendous effect on how I see myself?

Strongly Agree				Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

I can easily describe how God's hand has been evident in my personal story.

Strongly Agree				Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

My life story is a very useful witness or testimony about the wisdom and power of God.

Strongly Agree				Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

I can easily think of friends or co-workers who would benefit from hearing my conversion story or other faith stories from my life.

Strongly Agree				Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

Post-Seminar Interview Questions

1. What is your overall impression of the *Walking with God* seminar?
2. What did you learn about yourself or your life from the Post-It Note Timeline exercise?
3. Did this seminar help you realize anything about your relationship with God? If so, what did you learn and how has it affected your view of God or yourself?
4. Was it helpful for you to focus on a biblical mentor? If so, please explain why and how.
5. Through the course of the six weeks, how well did you keep up with the daily readings and exercises in the *Walking with God Prayer Journal*?
6. Did you find the prayer journal helpful and engaging? What could be done to improve it or make it more useful?
7. What did you think of the closing dinner and family night at the end of the seminar? Can you think of any way that night could be made more effective in the future?
8. If a younger teen in the youth group asked you about this experience, how would you describe it to them?
9. Would you recommend this experience to your friends or younger members of the youth group? Why or why not?

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